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Chapter 1

2011

1.1 February

Welcome to the NHK (2011-02-05 23:15)

ollege dropout Sato is a hikikomori, an individual who has completely withdrawn from society and holes himself up in his apartment, and has been for going on four years. Not even the obnoxiously loud music from next door can snap him out of it, and his demented mind has come to the conclusion that he is the subject of a conspiracy to keep him down by the secretive NHK. Hope arrives on his doorstep one day in the form of Misaki, a pretty, friendly young woman who claims that she can help him escape his dead-end lifestyle, but Sato is reluctant to accept her help and finds himself caught in a web of lies upon trying to deny what he is. The discovery that his music-playing neighbor is actually Yamazaki, an otaku disenchanted with real life whom he knew in school, only drags Sato further into the pit but does offer him an interesting opportunity: to convince Misaki that he is not just hiding away in his room, he will make a "gal game" (i.e. hentai game) as proof that he is a "creator."

Review:

ADV's advertisements for this one are a little misleading. Those who go into Welcome to the NHK expecting it to be something wacky like Excel Saga or playfully funny like Full Metal Panic! Fumoffu? are in for quite a shock, as anime comedies don't come any darker than this. Sato's actions, behavior, and situations certainly do have some humor inherent in them, but at times laughing at Sato feels as dirty and distasteful as laughing at the "special needs" kid you knew in school, the one stuck with the mentality of a 3-year-old. Think about the first volume more as a sociological and psychological case study which generates the occasional laugh and its true value and appeal appears.

Based on a light novel of the same name, the NHK anime explores two sociological phenomena that, while not unique to Japan, seem to be more prevalent there than anyone else in the world: NEETs (i.e. individuals aged 15-34 who are Not in Employment, Education, or Training) and especially hikikomori. The latter in particular has recently been the subject of jokes in anime, but nowhere else will you find such an in-depth look at what it actually means to be a hikikomori and how pathetic an existence it actually is. The first few episodes hit all of the major points which typify the hikikomori lifestyle: sleeping 16 hours a day; reluctant to leave one's room; rarely associating with other people; devoting all waking time to some combination of Internet porn, hentai games, TV, manga, or anime; not bothering to maintain personal

hygiene; and withdrawing from society in general. So self-absorbed and limiting is this lifestyle that it can hold a grip akin to drug addiction on a subject, and like with drug addicts, an outside intervention is often required to drag a person out of it. Misaki presents such an "out" for Sato, but like with any drug addict he has to admit he has a problem and dedicate himself to doing something about it before he can be helped, and like with addicts, that usually requires hitting rock-bottom first. That, in essence, is what we see in episodes 2 and 3.

But the first volume does not limit itself to just analyzing hikikomori. It also explores other aspects of extreme otakudom, such as the nature of hentai/ero/gal games and otaku strongholds such as doujinshi stores and maid cafés. As much as you might want to think these elements are aggrandized for sake of parody, they may strike too close to reality for the comfort of some viewers.

An interesting trio of main characters forms the core of the recurring cast and goes a long way towards humanizing the story. Although how Sato slid into his hikikomori lifestyle is not explored in this volume, he serves as the tool to explore all the darker sides of obsessive fan behavior and social dysfunction, which sets him well apart from the normal girl-shy anime male lead. Yamazaki represents a character type rarely seen in anime: a hard-core otaku who doesn't appear to be socially maladjusted but retreats deep into his hobbies because of his anger and displeasure with reality. (His rants against real girls vs. hentai game girls are particularly revealing.) Misaki serves as the compassionate, insightful outsider who somehow knows Sato and sees saving him from his hikikomori nature as a "project." Her tone at times suggests she may have an ulterior motive, but at this point in the series she still represents the uncompromising hope for a more mainstream life.

NHK will never be mistaken for an artistic masterpiece, but does have its visual good points. Background art, especially when depicting cityscapes and city streets, looks good and carry impressive detail, and close-up shots of characters usually fare well. Its male character designs set Yamazaki and Sato apart from run-of-the-mill college-aged males leads, and Misaki has a suitably fresh and attractive look without being overtly sexualized except in Sato's fantasies. (Although the pink parasol is overkill.) Sato's early hallucination scenes also have just the right feel. Hitomi, the recurring former senpai of Sato, has a more typical look, and character renderings which are never especially sharp become far rougher in many distance shots. Worse, the quality of the character artistry and animation suffers an atrocious breakdown for a while starting about nine minutes into episode 4. Even beyond that weak point the animation rarely looks good.

No fault can be found with the musical score, which never strikes a wrong note and flawlessly sets and enhances the mood of every scene. Most impressive in its light guitar, piano, and harmonica themes, it also offers nice rock, J-pop, and synthesized numbers and ratchets up the tension and anxiety of the more demonstrative scenes. This is a soundtrack worth listening to as an OST. An unremarkable J-pop number fronts each episode, while the thoroughly bizarre closer "Dancing Human Baby" (just try following the lyrics) mixes piano with heavy metal guitar, drum beats, and lyrical styling,

Fans sometimes complain about how ADV leans too much on a core roster of regulars for its dubs, but could anyone voicing English dubs these days fit the role of Sato better than Chris Patton? And while Greg Ayres' voice may not be a great match for Daisuke Sakaguchi as Yamazaki, he has just the right temperament for his role, too. Stephanie Wittels (Kano in Air and Yayoi in Air Gear) also is a nice fit as the kindly but not naïve Misaki, and none of the more minor casting choices and performances should generate significant gripes, either. The English script stays relatively close to the original, even using "gal game" as the original did instead of terms more familiar to American fans like "hentai game" or "ero game." The only notable changes are the addition of bonus parodies in some of the Next Episode previews, including one that any fan of Neon Genesis Evangelion should catch. (Why it wasn't in the original script, when it offered such a golden opportunity, baffles me.)

Typical Extras include clean opener and closer. Also present is Conspiracy Handbook 101, ADV's title-specific alternate name for their regular glossary inclusion. In this case it includes several content-specific terms like "doujinshi" and "Akihabara" which diehard otaku may be familiar with but more casual fans are unlikely to know. Both 2.0 and 5.1 English language tracks are available.

It may not have any actual nudity, but the first volume contains enough swearing, suggestive content, and adult subject matter to warrant a TV-MA rating in the USA. It otherwise invites comparisons to the also-fan-centered Genshiken, but whereas that series took a more loving and sentimental look at fandom, this one delivers an uncompromising examination of the seedier side of fandom and commonly-associated social disorders. It offers some laughs but its first volume works far better if one regards it more as a drama piece.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : A-
Animation : C+
Art : B-
Music : A-

+ Inisghtful examination of an issue rarely dealt with seriously, excellent musical score.
− Not as many laughs as advertised, serious breakdown in artistic quality in episode 4.

Tatsuhiro's encounter with his high school senpai Hitomi stirs up old school memories, which lead him to accept Misaki's counseling contract, which inspires him to make a more concerted effort on his gal game development. A trip to Yamazaki's school, in pursuit of the truth about whether or not Yamazaki actually has a girlfriend, leads him to sit in on a game design class, but ultimately the stress of the situation proves too much, causing him to sink even deeper into his hikikomori funk. Only a call from his mother, indicating that she intends to visit soon, can force him into action, but how is he going to be able to cover his claims that he has an actual job and a girlfriend he's thinking about marrying? And why is Misaki so eager to step up and help? Or is it all just more NHK conspiracy?

Review:

If someone somewhere does not use this series for discussion in a sociology class or project then a golden opportunity is being wasted. Nowhere else, save perhaps Neon Genesis Evangelion, will you see such a thorough exploration of one person's social dysfunction, and Tatsuhiro rivals even Shinji Ikari in terms of dysfunctional behavior. Watching what he goes through, and how unable he is to cope with life without outside help, can at times be a discomforting experience, yet also a fascinating one. And as this volume also suggests, his initial transition into being a hikikomori probably was not a sudden thing. The roots of it certainly lay in his school years. The insights the series shows are so sharp and detailed that one has to think original creator Tatsuhiko Takimoto based the story heavily on personal experiences.

Watching Yamazaki can also be interesting, as he represents the intense, almost militant otaku who clearly feels more comfortable in his own skin than Tatsuhiro but also has his own issues. Some of his behavior can be disconcerting (the Pururin body pillow has all sorts of wrongness written all over it, but such things do actually exist), but what guy who does/once did consider himself geeky or a fanboy can honestly

say he doesn't have at least a bit of Yamazaki in him?

Misaki at first looked only like the cute "out" to provide Tatsuhiro hope for a better life, and she does serve as a tool for delving further into the analytical psychology of the hikikomori, but as this volume begins to imply, not everything may be good in her life, either. Hints dropped throughout these four episodes suggest that she could wind up being the "girl taken with the hero in childhood" character so common in anime series, and that she may be trying to reform Tatsuhiro as much out of romantic motivations as pure kindness or practical experiment. Tatsuhiro certainly seems like an unlikely prospect for such a cute girl, but much here yet remains unrevealed. (Wouldn't you love to hear what's really going on in Misaki's head?) Whatever the truth, her presence, and that of Hitomi, lend some brightness and stability to Tatsuhiro's screwed-up, delusional world, as well as some actual pleasant characters to look at.

And that begs the question: are Gonzo and Studio Easter, who collaborated on this projecting, deliberately trying to make Tatsuhiro look as unappealing as possible? Rarely in anime do you see a male lead so homely as Tatsuhiro is, and the effect of his reclusive ways on his appearance cannot account for all of that. Yamazaki has the expected (but not exaggerated) nerdish appearance, and background depictions of otaku seem to go out of their way to portray the most unglamorous specimens, but at least they have to be respected for not playing these depictions up as jokes or caricatures. The young female characters, by contrast, are in the full bloom of their cute/sexy beauty, and both get some brief fan service-ish opportunities, though again, the series avoids needless exaggeration except in Tatsuhiro's delusions.

The character designs would be fine if not for the big problem with artistry: its quality is grossly inconsistent. Complaints about occasional quality control breakdowns in the first volume were, unfortunately, only the tip of the iceberg. At times the artistry looks nearly as beautiful as the best series out there, especially in selected background shots in episode 8, and the background art in general stands strong. The character renderings can range anywhere from attractive to quite rough, however, and the same can be said for the animation; one scene where Misaki stumbles down some stairs looks particularly awkward, for instance, but in other places the animation moves along quite smoothly. Although these episodes technically feature no actual nudity, it does have enough close calls, fan service elements, and suggestive content to warrant a TV-MA rating. (Though how this one gets TV-MA and Step Up Love Story doesn't still baffles me.)

Musical themes in these episodes repeat the poignant guitar/piano numbers used to punctuate key moments in the first volume, as well as mixing in other softer numbers to promote a usually gentle mood. Delusional scenes, by contrast, get more of a rock treatment. The nice J-pop opener and whacked-out closer remain constant.

Would it be indirectly insulting to say that no other American anime voice actor could have fit the role of Tatsuhiro half as well as Chris Patton? But it's true. He has the neuroses and attitudes of Tatsuhiro so perfectly pegged that those watching the series in English first may find it hard to imagine anyone else in that role, the original Japanese performer included. It may ultimately stand as one of Mr. Patton's career-best performances, and certainly ranks amongst the year's best. His efforts outshine what would otherwise have been a stand-out effort by Greg Ayres as Yamazaki and a quality performance by the up-and-coming Stephanie Wittels as Misaki; we will certainly be hearing much more from her in dubs to come, since she has a naturally soft, kind tenor well-suited to teenage girls in anime roles and a goodly amount of acting ability. The script adjusts wording at times but does stay faithful on using "gal game" as opposed to the more common "ero game" or "hentai game" terms used in the States.

ADV's production offers only clean opener and closer for Extras. Their selection of cover art also leaves more than a bit to be desired. The series' artbox is available with this volume, however.

As with the first four episodes, the second four offer an occasional good laugh and some common romantic comedy hijinks, but more often they play better taken as straight drama and character study with some romantic overtones. It may not be the most purely entertaining series, and is more apt than most to make its viewers feel uncomfortable at times, but that makes it no less interesting to watch.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : A-
Animation : B-
Art : B
Music : B+

+ Involving character study, strong English dub work.
− Inconsistent artistic and animation quality, cover art.

With grit and cyber-spit, Yamazaki and Sato finally finish their homemade porn game. Unfortunately their sales at the comic market (five copies) destroy once and for all their dreams of becoming ero-game magnates. Yamazaki retires to his family's ranch to take over their dairy business, and Sato finds himself minus his one real friend. Misaki steps in to fill the void, even proposing as a "final test" a New Year's visit to the local shrine. Sato of course gets lost, and when Misaki witnesses his rescue by ex-flame Hitomi, she's conflicted to say the least. Misaki decides to take their relationship to the next level in her usual twisted way, but the result is less than felicitous. In the fall-out Sato comes face-to-face with Misaki's ugly past and his unflattering role in her quest to secure a place in a world that she feels has no use for her. To his dismay he discovers that he must not only cope, but actually help or risk the complete self-destruction of a relationship that neither has the emotional equipment to properly nurture, and at least one hasn't the ability to survive without. But can one emotional cripple really save another?

Review:

For the moment, let's set aside the fact that Funimation bungled, with Three Stooges-level finesse, their license rescue of Welcome to the NHK It is, after all, a shame to bellyache with such an immensely satisfying conclusion on one's plate. NHK's stock-in-trade may be the darkly humorous dissection of the social afflictions of the marginalized and psychologically damaged, but its beating heart is the malformed romance between Sato and Misaki. It was certainly good, black fun to watch the series kick down-on-his-luck Sato with big, pyramid-scheme feet, but without any real development in their relationship, volume five had the feel a series that had lost its way. Not so volume six. If Misaki and Sato's relationship is the heart of the series, this volume is all heart.

And in grand NHK style, it's twisted, somewhat blackened heart. This certainly isn't your parents' anime romance. Misaki's confession of her need for Sato is no mere confession of love; it's an exposure of all of the boiling insecurities, frightened selfishness and emotional confusion of a person who has found their reason for living in another person, but who has been so damaged by life that they haven't the emotional tools to express or even understand what they are feeling. Likewise Sato's bid to save Misaki is no platitude-saves-the-day plot device, but rather the desperate flailing of a man who realizes that his lifestyle has deprived him of the relationship skills necessary to save the girl he cares for. Even more than watching two well-adjusted people finding happiness together, there's something unutterably satisfying about

watching damaged people finding someone whose scars match their own and making one last, desperate bid for happiness. Sato and Misaki make a staggeringly dysfunctional pair, but it's hard not to root for them, and, as the series brings all of their combined history to bear in the finale, to feel for them.

It isn't all (sorta) romantic drama, of course. Sato lives to see his ero-game dreams squished by reality, Yamazaki gets a chance to vent his bitterness at being forced to give up his dream, and Hitomi shows up to bring some closure to her relationship with Sato (and inadvertently screw with Misaki's feelings). And even if discomfiting humor isn't this volume's aim, there are laughs to be had, as with Sato's zombified return to the work-force. But this is Sato and Misaki's volume, and the other aspects do suffer in comparison. Yamazaki and Hitomi's issues are tied up far too neatly, while Sato's escape from the hikikomori lifestyle happens too quickly to be entirely convincing (and also serves rather conveniently as a plot device to worsen Misaki's condition).

Standing at the center of the series' longest-standing emotional entanglement as it swirls into a full-fledged emotional climax, Misaki's performance is this volume's lynchpin. The role requires both actresses to navigate some heavy waters, from intense outbursts to poison bitterness to forced confidence undercut by quavering uncertainty. While Stephanie Wittels can't quite cut the heart out of you the way the understated Yui Makino can, she's grown far enough into the role to make some positive adjustments, particularly Misaki's even-keeled confidence during her final scenes with Sato. Chris Patton, on the other hand, is pure revelation. His Sato is both funnier and more intense than Yutaka Koizumi's, and he communicates with vitality and conviction both the growing sensitivity and the unpleasant underbelly of Sato's personality. He makes his missteps—he delivers Sato's penultimate speech to Misaki with such conviction that it's almost an honest appeal instead of the regurgitation of empty platitudes that it's supposed to be—but they're inconsequential flaws in a gem of a performance. It's a damned shame that fans who bought the first five volumes have had to wait until now (nearly two months after the box sets) to hear it. ADV's scriptmasters, by the way, write with all the fidelity one could desire—with the exception of a few hilarious ad-libs by Patton.

If you look hard enough, there's plenty to grumble about—after all NHK has never been a work of perfection, more a smart, shaggy underachiever. In addition to the too-convenient resolution of sticky side-character issues, director Yusuke Yamamoto falls back into his habit of letting the guitar score play through scenes that it really shouldn't, and GONZO's visuals remain a tad uneven, often drawing the characters sloppily in medium shots and draining the two big fan-service scenes of all their titillating power with some truly clunky animation. But frankly everything, the rushed side-plots, the occasionally messy art, the poorly animated sequences—it all disappears into the shadow of a final story arc that once again marshals all of the series' unforgiving insight and sympathy for the human castoffs of modernity. It's difficult to care that the fan-service was botched when Yamamoto can suggest a world of self-flagellating shame with little more than a flashback to a raised fist and a sideways shift of harried eyes. Or to care that Yamazaki's life resolves itself far too rosily when Misaki and Sato's relationship is climaxing in a frenzy of misguided self-sacrifice that is both surreal and bizarrely logical. As rough around the edges as they are, these four episodes are NHK at its best: insane, cutting and potent. All that and a happy ending too.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : A-
Animation : B-
Art : B
Music : B

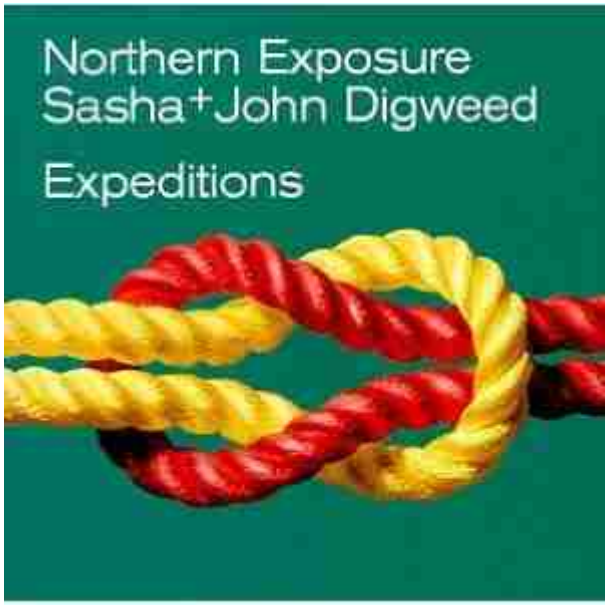
\+ A sympathetic portrayal of the devastating effect that a budding relationship has on two people

whose emotional stability has been destroyed by long exposure to the worst of life.
− Lacks the pitch-black humor of the series at large; rushes some of its side-plots to conclusion; affection for its psychologically crippled cast is necessary for full appreciation.

Top 32 trance cds (2011-02-06 20:31)

It gets you through the day unlike heavy metal and country although it is passive.
1.) Armin Van Buuren - Universal Religion 2004

2.) Sasha - John Digweed Northern Exposure III

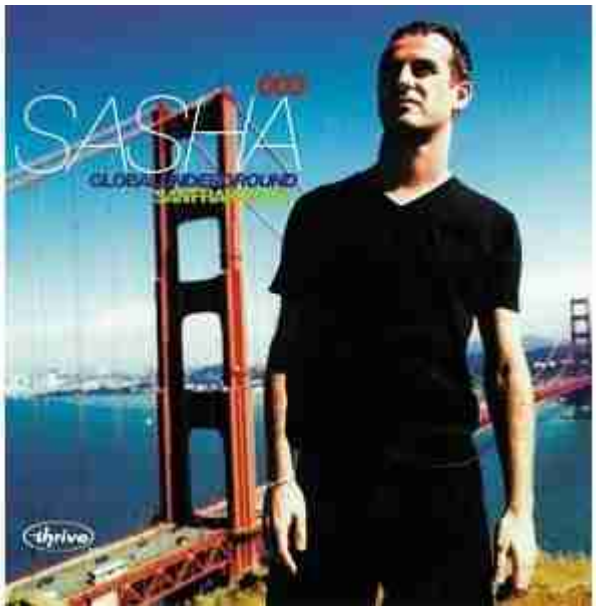


3.) Sasha and John Digweed - Northern Exposure II West/East Coast Edition

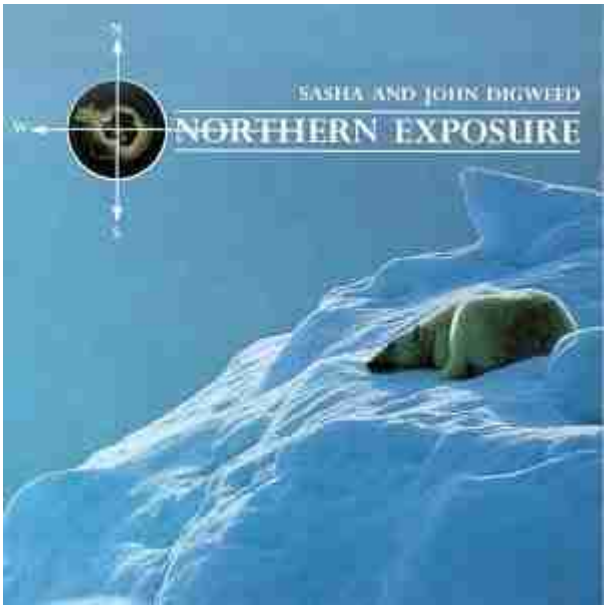
4. Sasha - Involver

5.) Sasha - Global Underground 013: Ibiza

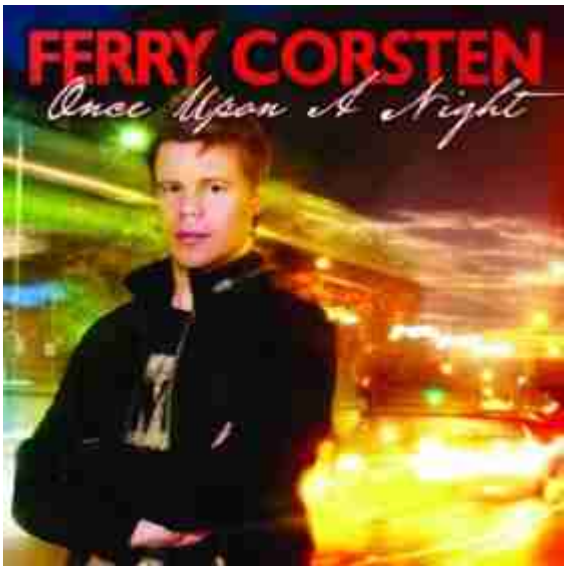
6. Sasha - Global Underground 003 San Francisco



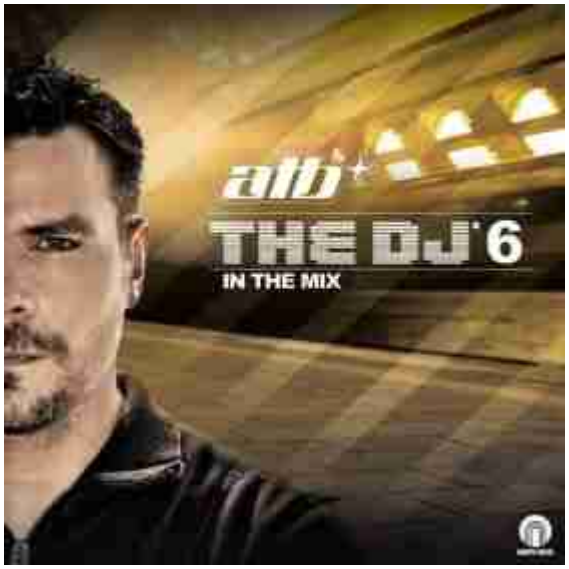
7. Sasha - John Digweed - Northern Exposure



8. Ferry Corsten - Once Upon a Night Vol 2



9. ATB - DJ 6 in the MIx



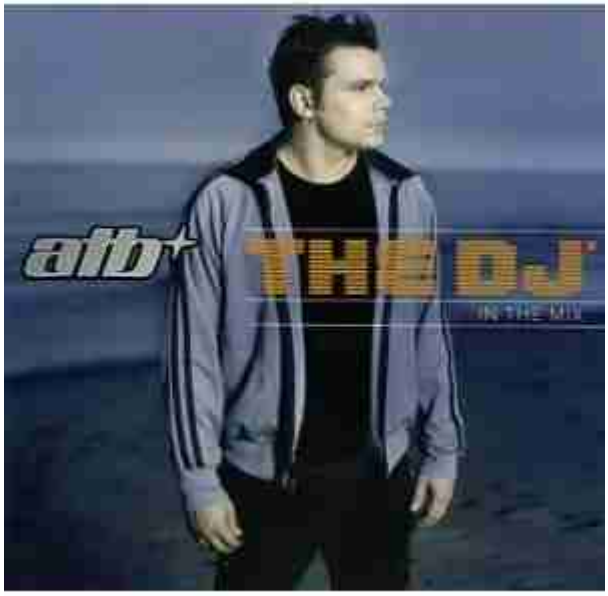
10. Ferry Corsten - Once Upon a Night

11. Markus Schulz - Miami '05

12.) Markus Schulz - Ibiza '06

13. ATB - DJ In the Mix 2

14. ATB - DJ In the Mix



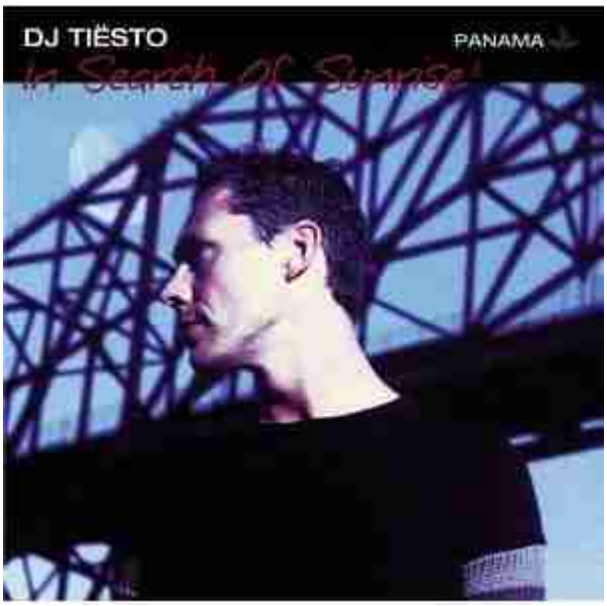
15. The Thrillseekers - Nightmusic Vol 1

16. The Trillseekers - Nightmusic Vol 2

18. Tiesto - In Search of Sunrise

19. Tiesto - In Search of Sunrise 2

20. Teisto - In Search of Sunrise 3

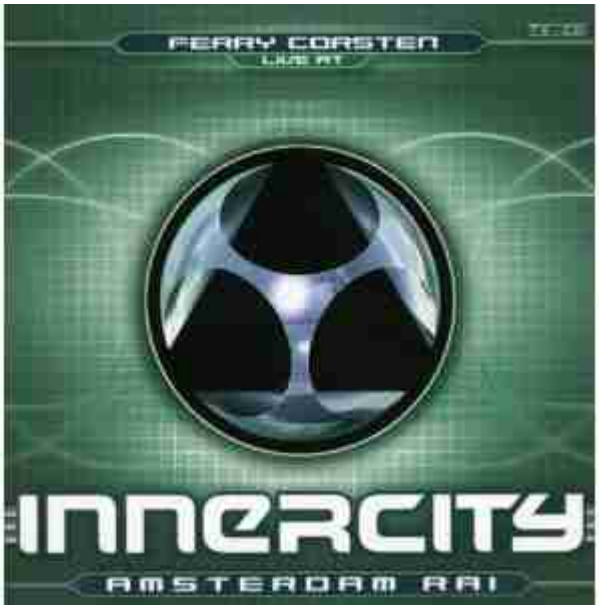


21. Ferry Corsten - Twice in a Blue Moon

22. ATB DJ 3 in the Mix

23. Sasha - Airdrawndagger

24. Ferry Corsten – Live At Innercity



25. Markus Schulz - Toronto ’09

26. Markus Schulz - Amsterdam ’08

27. ATB - DJ 5 in the Mix

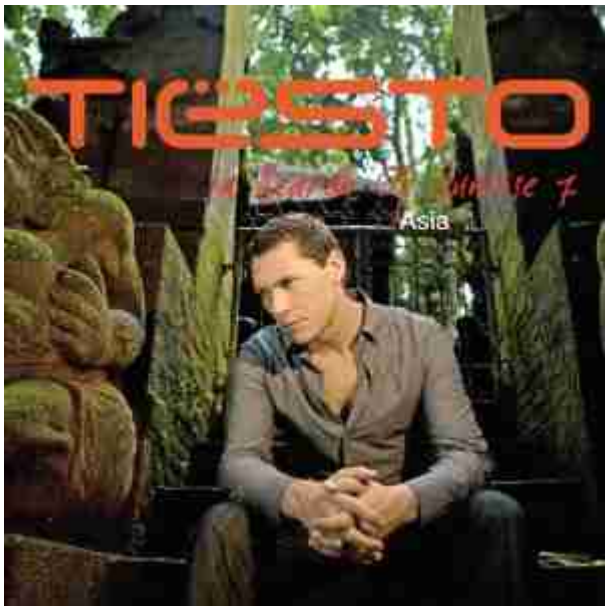
28. Armin Van Buuren - Universal Religion 4

29. Armin Van Buuren - Universal Religion 3

30. Armin Van Buuren - Universal Religion Chapter 1

31. Markus Schulz - Las Vegas '10

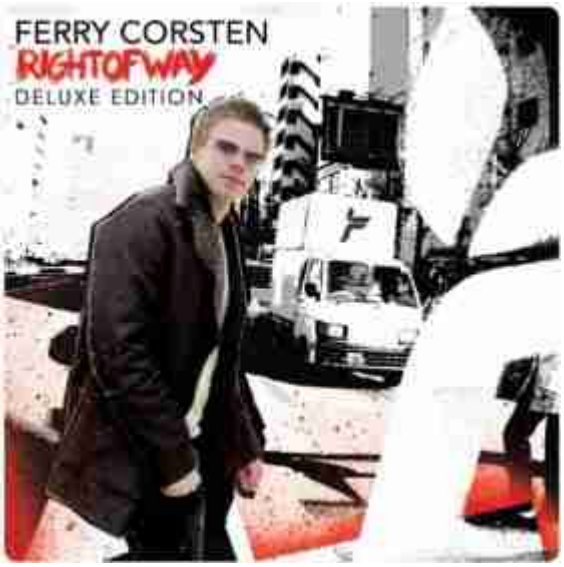
32. Teisto - In Search of Sunrise 7



33. ATB - DJ 4 in the Mix

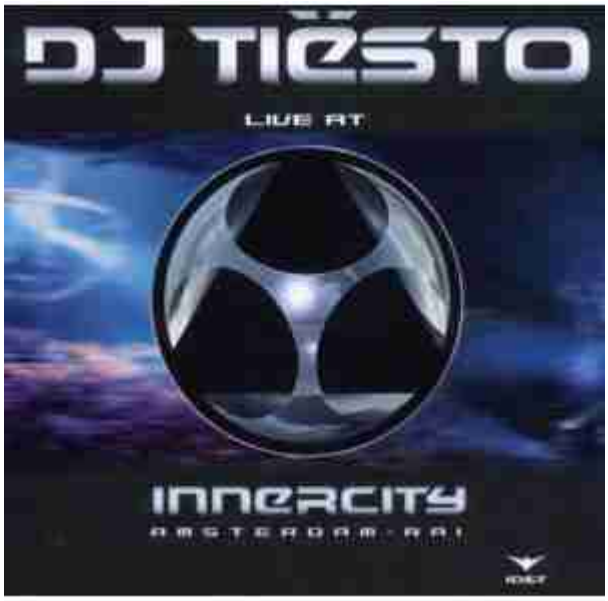
Getting more trance cds? Best bet is by collecting Armin Van Buuren's State of Trance annually.

34. Ferry Corsten - Right of Way



35. Teisto - In Search of Sunrise 6

36. DJ Teisto - Live at Innercity



37. Sasha - In2volver

Gurren Lagann (2011-02-06 23:03)

Simon, a skilled driller, diligently works to expand his underground village while his "big brother" Kamina steadfastly seeks to reach the mythical "surface" he believes he saw as a child. While drilling one day Simon comes across a strange drill bit, which later proves the key to operating a robotic face he also discovers. The second discovery, soon dubbed Lagann, becomes vital when a giant Gunmen (i.e. face-dominated mecha) falls through the ceiling, pursued by the buxom, gun-toting Yoko. The ensuing battle opens a path to the surface, allowing the trio to ascend. There Kamina carves out a place and reputation for himself by seizing a Gunmen, soon dubbed Gurren, from its Beastman pilot and defeating all foes. In the process he and Simon discover that they make a powerful combination when their machines come together to form the unified mecha Gurren Lagann. Inspired by Kamina's heroics (and supreme manliness!), a large group of humans, first called Team Gurren and later team Dai-Gurren, gradually gathers to combat the Beast Men, their Gunmen, and the Spiral King who stands behind them all.

Review:

When ADV first claimed the immensely popular Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann in late 2007 they seem to have achieved a major licensing coup. However, ADV saw TTGL slip through its fingers less than a month shy of its scheduled release when their business arrangement with the Japanese licensing company Sojitz apparently collapsed, which opened up an opportunity for Bandai Entertainment to swoop in and pick it up. Fans were ecstatic that the title had not only been "rescued" but also arranged for a cable broadcast on Sci Fi Channel's "Ani-Monday" programming block beginning in late July 2008. To hurry the title out while still blazing hot, Bandai opted for the highly unusual practice of releasing the series first in three subtitled-only dual-disk volumes, with their English dubbed version to follow in early 2009. Given the remarkably boring title logo and cover art for the first volume, fans may long find themselves wondering if the right company ultimately ended up with the title, as little about Bandai's production of the first volume conveys the raw energy integral to making this series the biggest hit in anime fandom since The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya. One has to think that ADV, a company much more inventive when it comes to hype,

would've come up with a more compelling presentation than this.

Once you get past the packaging, though, a true spectacle awaits. Unlike most other prominent animation studios, Gainax was founded by a group of diehard otaku raised on the classic giant mecha series of the late '60s and '70s, and periodically during the studio's history it has paid tribute to those roots by producing a loving homage to giant robot mecha that has been infused with more recent sensibilities to create something entirely new. Such is the case with TTGL. It may not be as innovative and revolutionary as Neon Genesis Evangelion – in fact, its spirit and look much more resemble Gunbuster 2 – but that does not at all diminish how much fun it is to watch. Most viewers will not be able to resist getting swept up in the torrent of high-spirited energy that permeates the early episodes through to their core. It is utterly over-the-top, deliciously bombastic, bodacious, unapologetically sexy, and loaded with enough bravado to face down an entire herd of charging bulls. It slams its pedal to the metal and charges boldly forward, barely lets up before the end of episode 8, often leaving its viewers breathless in its wake and never giving them an opportunity to ponder how completely ridiculous its premise and combats are. Even if one did do that, why would it matter? The first several episodes, and especially the first one, are balls-to-the-wall anime enthusiasm at its finest.

The spirit and vigor of the episodes is fully embodied in Kamina, one of its two leading men. His relentless machismo, fierce determination, and unshakable confidence do not make him a particularly deep character, but he serves his purpose beautifully here. "Who do you think I am?" becomes his trademark line when faced with friend or foe who deems him unworthy or thinks that he should retreat in the face of an enemy, and he inspires many to follow in his stead. Sure, we have certainly seen this archetype before, but Kamina endears himself to the viewer more than most of his ilk because, unlike nearly all similar characters, he is not selfish. Aside from reaching the surface and constantly reinforcing his badass manliness, his main goal in life seems to be to help the cowardly Simon grow into a worthy and respectable man. He never seems happier than when Simon triumphs, even if that means giving up the glory himself, and that surely resonates deeply with many fans. The flaming gay Leeron and other prominent male supporting characters make less of an impression.

Yoko, the primary female character through these nine episodes, is no push-over herself, and is perhaps the least stereotypical of the core cast introduced so far. She is neither the emotionless ice princess nor the flaming hothead one normally sees in these sexy "girls with guns" roles, but instead finds a comfortable medium between the two. The way her sparse clothing flaunts her curvaceous figure never lets you forget the sex appeal inherent in her role, and her massive gun and competence in the heat of battle confirms her action heroine status, but there is more to Yoko than just that. Most of the more subtle nuances of characterization in the first third of the series can be found in her, which makes her more than just the sum of her ogle-worthy parts. Episode 9 adds Nia, a gentle and more petite female character, to the mix as a decided counterbalance to Yoko. She looks like she will become a prominent regular cast member, but the volume runs out before she gets established enough to delve much into her persona.

The subtler aspects of the series are not limited to Yoko, either. For all its seeming shallowness, TTGL often gives the impression that there is a bit more to it all than all its surface bluster. That , unfortunately, does not prevent the early part of the series from indulging in tired retread scenes like the "must find a way to peek over the wall at the naked ladies in the hot springs" sequence in episode 6, or occasionally descending into other equally dead story gimmicks, but a viewer can get the sense that the series will eventually achieve something more. The dramatic shift in tone that results from a stunning (but also thoroughly telegraphed) development at the end of episode 8 may mark that turning point, but as the volume ends that remains to be seen.

The overall look of the series owes much to Gunbuster 2 (and less directly to FLCL), especially in

the way characters move and certain attacks are executed. While Simon's design is more typical, Kamina, with his perpetually bare chest and sharply-pointed sunglasses, cuts a more bold and manly figure. Yoko is given a much more hippy character design than one normally sees in anime girls (something which Kamina regularly teases her about), but, of course, the way her short shorts and not-big-enough halter top provide regular doses of fan service is the main point here. Nia, in a total visual contrast, radiates a charmingly sweet and demure look when she finally appears. Other supporting characters tend to have rougher looks. The Gunmen also distinguish themselves from other modern mecha with cartoonish designs that sometimes seem like throwbacks to the '70s kids shows like the Time Bokan family of titles. Even more modern-looking ones, like the head-shaped miniature Lagann with its brain-patterned protective shield, have a fresh look to them. Beastmen designs, by comparison, range from convincing hybrid forms to the positively silly. Although the primary color scheme is vivid and appealingly colorful, Gainax often uses variations in the color scheme to reflect mood and environment, especially in the underground scenes and, to a lesser extent, in episode 9. Respectable background art is also a regular feature. The animation is better than most of Gainax's other productions, although the styling of the way characters and mecha move (especially in the involved fight scenes) may not work for everyone.

For all of its great and exciting look, and for all of its normal production quality, TTGL does, unfortunately, suffer from quality control issues. This is most painfully obvious in episode 9, where character designs lose their sharpness, Yoko becomes less busty, and in general everything takes on a rougher edge. (The degradation is, in fact, very similar to artistic breakdowns that happen in two episodes of The Third: The Girl with the Blue Eye.) Lesser problems can be seen in episode 4 and other individual spots throughout the series, and some design elements are not consistently maintained; the size and coverage of Yoko's halter top varies a bit from scene to scene and angle to angle, for instance. The problems here are doubtless connected to the vast array of different key artistic personnel who worked on the series, as the episode director, storyboarder, and animation director all vary from episode to episode, with many responsible for only a single episode.

And this being a Gainax series, it does, of course, have loads of fan service. As previously mentioned, Yoko is inherent fan service, but even beyond that she gets the occasional opportunity to flash even more skin and the camera seems obsessed with using angles that emphasize her sexuality. A trio of sisters pops up on multiple occasions to flash their curves, but the "hot springs" episode takes fan service to absurd levels, such as characters moved along by lines of bouncing breasts and male characters employing amusing methods to cover their manhood. (One deliciously ironic scene shows Yoko complaining about the male characters cavorting with Playboy bunny-clad girls while she stands with her ample chest stuck out.) Let's not forget the occasional phallic symbolism in that and other places, either. Another kind of fan service comes in the cameos present in the "hot springs" episode, as Gainax borrows designs from across the spectrum of its previous series to stock its Playboy bunnies, albeit often making them look much bustier than in their original form; look carefully for representatives of Neon Genesis Evangelion, Mahoromatic, and both Gunbuster series, among others, and keep a careful eye out for one "queen" bunny.

For all its other merits, the soundtrack may be the series' least impressive aspect. It does an adequate job of hyping up the action scenes and underscoring certain stirring sequences, but overall it is not a major contributor to the production's success. Lively but also pedestrian J-rock numbers open and close each episode. Note that the opener visuals update in episode 9 to reflect the events of episodes 8 and 9, though the music remains the same.

Instead of using the dub cast ADV had already selected, Bandai handed the series over to Bang Zoom! for a complete recasting, which means the ADV dub for the first few episodes (if ever made) may one day be regarded as one of those obscure anime oddities. Dub fans will have to wait for either the Sci Fi Channel broadcast or early 2009's dual language releases to hear it, however, as only the subtitles are

present here. Again, one has to wonder if this will ultimately prove the best option, as ADV's dubs have traditionally been at their best when dealing with boisterous, over-the-top content like this, but only time will tell on that. The Japanese cast certainly turns in some fine work here, especially Katsuyuki Konishi in the defining role of Kamina. Pickier viewers may take some issue with how the subtitle text handles thing, especially the Spiral King's name.

Although Bandai has put two disks totaling nine episodes in this release for a regular anime volume retail price, they have gone quite shy on the Extras. Both disks contain only the first clean opener and closer, but the fact both disks have them suggests that Bandai is just going to slap the dub onto each disk and release them separately come next year. The original Japanese opening and closing credits are retained for each episode, with cumulative English credits only at the end of each disk. A Special Edition version also includes a CD. Bandai's decision to release the subtitled-only episodes exactly one-third at a time may also be called into question here, as the end of episode 8 seems like a much more natural disk break point than the end of episode 9.

Despite some flaws, TTGL succeeds wonderfully in its first third precisely because it seems to know exactly what it wants to aim for and hits a bull's-eye in execution. It looks like it may take a more serious turn in its second third, but it definitely gets off to a slammin', fun-lovin' start.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : A-
Animation : B+
Art : B+
Music : B-

\+ Loads of enthusiastic fun, plenty of dynamic action and fan service, likeable characters, hidden depth.
− Artistic quality control issues, some material is tiresomely retread.

NOTE: This review unavoidably contains massive spoilers for the first volume. Reading it is not recommended unless you have already seen at least through episode 8.

Devastated more than anyone else by the death of Kamina, Simon struggles to find purpose and motivation in his life while the Spiral King's generals continue their assaults on Team Dai-Gurren and their new mobile fortress. He finds some inspiration in the support of the charmingly guileless Nia, a discarded daughter of the Spiral King who must come to terms with the meaning of her own existence and forge her own path forward – and that path seems to lie with Simon. When a clever enemy ruse leads the team into the most desperate of circumstances, Simon finally takes decisive action in his own way as he steps up to become the man Kamina always wanted him to be. With Simon now at the lead, the forces of Team Dai-Gurren, and new allies they pick up along the way, march against the remaining Generals and the Spiral King himself in his capital city of Teppelin. The final confrontation with Lordgenome, the Spiral King, reveals some of the truth of the world, and a cryptic but especially disturbing warning about the future.

Seven years later, the absence of the Spiral King's tyranny has allowed humanity to develop at an explosive rate, but the Spiral King's dire words still linger in the minds of the new society's leaders, including Simon and Roussiu. With the birth of a single child the terrible truth of his warning starts to become apparent.

Review:

In its first story arc Gurren Lagann was the epitome of the bombastic, macho, high-spirited old-school giant robot series it so deliciously paid tribute to, a spirit which in many senses came crashing down with the death of Kamina, its human embodiment, at the end of episode 8. At times during the post-Kamina Spiral King arc, which spans episodes 9-15, the series recaptures that heady spirit, especially in the glorious sequence of scenes in episode 11 where Simon finally and decisively comes to terms with who he is and makes sure everyone knows it. And what studio other than Gainax could take a scene so infused with potent bravado and turn it into an emotional as well as storytelling triumph? For all of the silliness displayed elsewhere, it's moments like that which have won the series legions of fans and which keeps them coming back.

But, as a whole, Gurren Lagann is not the same series in its middle third that it was in its first third. Sure, it has a semi-beach episode to give another opportunity for the female side of the cast to flash some skin, but the light-hearted frivolity has become less frequent and the overall tone of the series has subtly shifted. The fighting gradually becomes less about proving manly superiority than about waging a true rebellion against the authority of the Spiral King, and the victories gradually become less about personal achievement than they do advancement of a cause. This all culminates in an even more dramatic transition in the post-Spiral King arc, which begins with episode 17. (What happened to episode 16? It's just a recap episode.) We get to see how character have aged and changed – in some cases dramatically – with the passage of time, and how this has changed their values in some cases. More importantly, at that point the series becomes less about a triumphant adventure than a struggle to protect what humankind has created; in other words, the story has matured along with the cast. As if to serve official notice that the fun-loving frivolity is over, one of the major characters undergoes a devastating and heartbreaking transformation to mark the onslaught of the newest and greatest threat.

Although Simon's rise to leadership may define this block of episodes, the emergence of Nia as a key cast member is nearly as important. Her soft look and sound, bewitching innocence, and charming lack of knowledge about the real world all endear her to viewers in a very moe-like manner, but hidden beneath that gentle veneer is a core of steel, one as firm and resolute, in its own way, as Kamina's indomitable spirit. Unlike so many other moe characters out there, her background, when she learns it, affects her but does not define her; in fact, it seems to make her stronger, more determined. She is much more than the companion for Simon that Yoko could not be, as evidenced by her ownership of what is arguably this block of episodes' second most powerful scene (the graveyard scene near the end of episode 11). The only other newer character worth a mention is the armadillo-like General, who is the only one of the four to show a modicum of intelligence and cunning or any personality beyond your standard shonen leader-type bad guy. Even Lordgenome himself offers nothing special. Yoko, however, continues to prove that there is more substance to her than just being a big-breasted bimbo.

While the first third of the series suffered from erratic artistry in some episodes, the overall look and visual style, for better or worse, remains more consistent through this span of episodes. An old-school look supported by modern digital coloring and fan service sensibilities creates a production that looks both fresh and classic at the same time, one which evokes flashes of FLCL and Gunbuster 2 but generally sets itself apart from most other recent series. The updated character designs in the post-Spiral King episodes provide pleasing extrapolations of how the younger cast members look when older; Darry (the young girl) in particular ages quite impressively. The only downside on the character design updates is the haircut Nia gets at one point, which makes her look too boyish and is, thankfully, returned to a more suitable length in the new arc. Except for the beach episode the fan service actually tones down quite a bit during this run, and

even the beach scenes pale in comparison to the hot springs episode last volume. More inventive are the mecha designs, which often seem to embody characteristics of their users and sometime take on a playful feel, such as General Adiane's "are they eyes or are they breasts" custom Gunmen. Regular animation is not the smoothest, and in fact is sometimes deliberately jerky, but the animation avoids excessive shortcuts in battle scenes by using a highly stylized and exaggerated old-school approach that may not work for some. Also notable are the ever-changing eyecatch pieces, which offer two new still shots each episode.

The series' soundtrack is still not its strongest point but deserves a bit more credit through this run of episodes for what it does to enhance and support the action in any given scene. Do not expect much for new musical numbers outside of the recap episode and an update to the eyecatch theme, however. The original opening song remains consistent throughout, although its visuals update again in episode 17 to mark the beginning of the third story arc. The original closer continues through episode 15, after which a one-shot theme set to series concept art fills in as the closer for episode 16 before the new closer, "Minna no Peace" by Afromania (a number which sounds an awful lot like some of the Naruto opening themes), takes over with episode 17.

The Japanese vocal work distinguishes itself by playing well to the flamboyant spirit of these exaggerated characters, but the most notable performance is actually Yukari Fukui's subdued performance as Nia. Her delivery style defines Nia's character as much as the actual characterization, so it will be interesting indeed to hear what Nia sounds like on the English dub. The English dub on DVD will have to wait for 2009's hybrid release, but I'm going to take this opportunity to comment on the Bang Zoom! dub which can be heard in the Sci Fi Channel broadcasts. Through episode 8 the casting decisions have been excellent, with most English renditions proving to be close fits for the originals. The only performance which can reasonably be called into question is Kyle Hebert's rendition of Kamina, which will take some getting used to for those who hear the Japanese version first since it does not seem to initially capture Kamina's full spirit. This impression fades away as the series progresses, however, and by episode 8 his version of Kamina kicks as much butt as Katsuyuki Konishi's original. The episodes including Nia (the one other role that could be a trouble spot for the English dub) have not come up yet as of the time of this writing, so how appropriate Hynden Walch (Amy from the second season of Immortal Grand Prix) will be in that role remains to be seen.

Bandai certainly offers a good deal by included nine episodes in a regular-sized DVD case for a typical DVD price, but a translation of the opening and closing credits anywhere on the DVDs or in the packaging might have been nice. Both disks share clean versions of the newer openers and closers as their only Extras.

Unlike most of its contemporaries, Gurren Lagann, with these episodes, shows a capacity to adapt to its story advancement and grow beyond its original parameters. It's still a purely entertaining series at heart, as it does not promote any deeper meaning than being true to yourself, finding your own self-confidence, and striving towards your goals, but it also shows that flamboyant style, ridiculous behavior, and over-the-top action do not preclude telling a solid and sincere story populated with worthy plot twists and characters that are more than just stereotypes.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : A-
Animation : B
Art : B+
Music : B

+ Development of Nia as the female lead, continues to be fun despite generally getting more serious.
− Animation style (especially in fights) may not work for everyone, lack of translated credits.

Nia has become the agent of the Anti-Spiral forces, the Moon is coming to crash into the Earth and wipe everything out, and Simon has been quickly tried, convicted, and locked away awaiting execution as a scapegoat, but the worst is still yet to come. Roussieau's desperate and calculated effort to save as many people as possible by leaving the planet in a gigantic Gunmen found deep under the capital city meets with fierce resistance in space, creating a situation that only the original Team Gurren, with Simon at their lead and help from an unexpected new ally and an absent old one, can handle. The stakes and threat levels rapidly increase as Simon and crew draw upon the Spiral power to pursue the Anti-Spiral forces to their extradimensional home world, both to rescue Nia and to secure the safety of humanity. In doing so they learn the ultimate truth about the oppression of the Spiral races, but once Simon sets his mind to something, even that won't stop him.

Review:

When one describes an anime series as "speaking from the heart," one is normally referring to some kind of romantic series. Gainax proved with Gunbuster and Gunbuster 2 that it is possible to apply that description to mecha anime series as well, and with the final third of Gurren Lagann they have done so again. This is the manly side of mushiness, the kind of content which speaks about people who truly throw everything they have – all of their passion, their hopes, their determination, and even their souls and very lives – into the crucible to challenge the heavens, to force a path to their own destinies and those that they hold dear. For some, it requires noble sacrifices; for others, it requires an acceptance of those they have long regarded as enemies or of the weight of their duties and responsibilities. For all, it is about the brash arrogance to think that, even when the universe is (literally) against you, there is still some way to triumph, and the will to make it happen. Thanks to Gainax's keen understanding of exactly how to best exploit this scenario, these final episodes repeatedly prove capable of choking up more sentimental viewers and perhaps even compelling a few manly tears. In short, these episodes bring one of the liveliest series of the decade to a rousing, rollicking good time of a finish.

Do these episodes recycle plot elements from numerous other series? Sure. Anyone who cannot at least basically predict how things are going to go down is probably an anime (and especially mecha) neophyte. Are things like literally punching a hole in space-time utterly preposterous? Sure, but that's also half the fun. Do either of those factors weigh the series down? Not at all. Despite some serious content, this is not the kind of fare that is intended to be analyzed in-depth, nor is it attempting to find any kind of credibility, subtlety, or multilayered meaning. It knows exactly what it wants to be, does not aspire to anything more, and in so doing succeeds brilliantly. Many, many other anime series out there could learn from this example.

The late episodes lose little of their punch in their visuals, maintaining the highly stylized look that has pervaded the previous series. The space vessels of the Anti-Spirals offer intriguing (though not entirely original) designs, and the Anti-Spiral avatar itself looks like a piece of abstract art that has hopped down off a museum canvas. Yoko also does not disappoint in her eventual reappearance, appearing with a properly matured look and suitably racy space outfit to follow up a reveal on where she has been for at least part of the past few years. Also watch for a startling late transformation by one long-term cast member. The animation, though not terribly impressive overall, suits the visual style well. Those that are watching the series only on Sci Fi Network should be aware that the broadcast is cutting out some great and always-changing eyecatch art.

Never a weak point, the musical score continues to do an excellent job of capturing and enhancing the changing moods and tones of the show, especially its key action sequences and high-spirited declarations. Though skipped in two late episodes, the version of the opener which accompanied the beginning of the last story arc continues through to the end, as does the most recent version of the closer. Also listen for some of the "Fight The Power" theme to creep into the actual episode content at times.

This release still includes no dub, but based on the Sci Fi Network broadcast the dub continues along just fine as it enters the series' late stages. Performers carrying over from the first two arcs continue solid characterizations and deliveries, and the new casting decisions (especially the recasting of Nia for her adult form), while not exciting, nonetheless do the job. The dub script also seems to stay surprisingly close to the original for as boisterous a show as this is.

Nine subbed-only episodes on two disks for basically the same cost as a regular DVD equates to only minimal Extras, this time including only textless renditions of the newest opener and closer.

The epilogue for the series is as much sad as joyous, yet it also feels exactly right. Everyone must ultimately answer to their true natures, and the beginning of the "seven years after" story arc showed what happens when people try to force themselves into roles that go against those natures. The ultimate fates of all the key characters are exactly the fates they should have had given their circumstances and personalities, and Gainax wisely chose not to force another path for any of them.For all its recycled plot elements and utterly preposterous nature, Gainax's paean to boisterous, macho mecha action delivers in triumphant fashion.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A
Overall (sub) : A
Story : A
Animation : B+
Art : B+
Music : A-

\+ Maximizes the series' potential by playing fully to its strengths, surprisingly affecting.
− Some plot elements are a little too retread, minimal Extras.

The Vision of Escaflowne (2011-02-10 23:12)

Hitomi is crushed when her best friend Yukari informs her that her beloved captain is moving away... but the night that was to be her last with him (and potential first kiss) saw the entrance of a mysterious boy in armor... and a dragon that he's hunting! When Hitomi saves him (with the help of a strange vision), the two are beamed back to his homeworld, Gaea... a world where he is Van Fanel, the new king of the land of Fanelia and pilot of the legendary mecha fighter "Escaflowne". But this is not a peaceful land; Fanelia is under attack from a mysterious army with invisible cloaking abilities... But there is more of a connection here than meets the eye.

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Review:

Few fans that are into fansubs at all haven't heard of Vision of Escaflowne. One of the top TV shows of 1996 (incidentally, the same year that brought us Neon Genesis Evangelion), this was one of the most popular shows in any fansub-lovers' arsenal... and it's not hard to see why.

A brain child of, in part, Shoji Kawamori (every single Macross series, Kenji's Spring), Vision of Escaflowne is kind of a cross between Never Ending Story, Super Dimension Century Orguss 02, and Record of Loduss War. The story involves one Hitomi Kanzaki, a typical high school girl who's into tarot cards and fortune telling, running track, and gazing at the object of her distant affections (and track team captain), Amano Susumu.

The animation, a seamless mix of computer-generated special effects and traditional cel animation, is groundbreaking for a TV show (and still good for a movie), and the music, from legendary duo Yoko Kanno (Macross Plus) and Hajime Mizoguchi (Please Save My Earth), is worth importing the CD's of.

While the plot may be nothing special, what is special is the execution. While we have seen almost all of these story elements before, we have never seen them together. Using all of these elements together, and flawlessly, is the real attraction of Escaflowne.

Technically, I was as impressed with Escaflowne as I was with AnimeVillage.com's subtitling job. In a world where the post-production abilities of budget-less fansubbers often outshine those of commercial companies, AnimeVillage has taken great care to maintain the top quality in production, even outdoing all existing fansubs of the series (despite using the now-infamous Captions, Inc. for the production). The timing is perfect, as are the translations. The credits are entirely translated, and replace the Japanese ones. The tape itself comes in a nice soft plastic clamshell case (in either white or black) and a high-quality printed sleeve.

Overall, my only gripe with this release is the tape shell: flimsy cheap reels are used, the kind that can actually burst on high-speed rewind modes on some VCR's and tape rewinders. (I already transplanted the ones on my copy with better ones.) Replace those reels, and Escaflowne quite makes for a perfect purchase. (The boxed set makes for an especially good deal.)
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall : A

Spice and Wolf (2011-02-16 22:59)

Centuries ago, the great wolf Holo journeyed south from her northern birthplace and became the goddess of the wheat harvest after striking a bargain with a young man in the village of Pasloe. For ages she insured rich harvests in most years and traditions built up around her, but as time passed and a new local noble developed more advanced farming techniques, lonely Holo came to feel that her commitment was no longer

needed. Taking human form as a teenage girl with wolf ears and tail, she hooks up with Lawrence, a traveling merchant who regularly does business in Pasloe, and convinces him to allow her to accompany him on a journey as much about companionship for both as it is about providing a convenient means for her to return north. Along the way she helps the enterprising Lawrence as he gets involved first in a complex (and ultimately dangerous) scheme involving currency devaluation and later when, after getting caught by surprise by price fluctuations, he must struggle to find a way to save his career, an effort which brings him into association with the shepherdess Nora – the one type of person Holo hates more than any other. When a spice-transporting merchant and a wolf come together, things are never dull.

Review:

The notion of a sexy, playful wolf girl who thinks nothing of showing nudity (she only dons clothes because "this form gets cold easily") might seem like classic otaku bait, but the soulful opener provides the first clue that this may be something entirely different. By the end of the second episode – and possibly even by the end of the first – viewers should realize that Spice and Wolf has no close kin amongst anime series in general, much less fantasy ones, and that is a Good Thing. Based on a series of novels by Isuna Hasekura, this is a surprisingly mature tale which has a certain playful spirit and does involve some action, fan service, and supernatural elements but ultimately depends far more on the strength of its characters and on plots heavily ground in economics to keeps its viewers involved. And that it does wonderfully well.

Ever watch a series where an entire episode can pass with little more happening than the two leads just talking to each other, and yet at the end of the episode you wonder where the time has gone? Spice and Wolf can do precisely that. The chemistry which quickly develops between Holo and Lawrence is an ideal example of the correct way to portray progressing character dynamics: let it happen naturally within the boundaries of the personalities of each character and without being forced by outside stimuli. Through the lengthy (but never tedious) conversations, Holo and Lawrence each show their distinct viewpoints and how they mesh or contrast with each other: he is a merchant who looks at things not necessarily from a silver-and-gold-coins point of view, but from one ground in the ebb and flow of trade; she is an extremely long-lived and temperamental wolf goddess who may have taken humanoid form, and delights in human pleasures, but is still very much a wolf. Within that confluence a thoroughly enjoyable anime duo is forged, with each one gradually learning how to (and not to) play off of the other. By the end of this first series they have not quite become a proper couple but are certainly headed in that direction.

For all that the practical-minded Lawrence brings to the series, the true star is indisputably Holo (whose name is often transliterated instead as Horo, although Holo seems to be the official version). She cuts a fine visual appeal with a sleek teenage physique, adorned with wolf ears and tail, that she does not mind showing off in nipple-less fan service scenes, but for her the nudity is much more an expression of character than prurient fan-pandering: it simply does not occur to her that being naked in Lawrence's presence might be an issue. Whether clothed or not, Holo is delightfully playful, sly, vain (especially about her tail!), easily jealous, and regularly quite clever, yet at times she also shows a deep loneliness borne of centuries of isolation from those who might understand her, from which comes a yearning for companionship which underlies everything she does. Her responses to certain situations also gives her a more natural and well-rounded feel than anime heroines typically achieve; in one scene in episode 2 where she goes too far in teasing Lawrence, the hurt on her face when Lawrence reacts negatively is that of a scolded child. This highly unusual blend of traits sets her well apart from the typical tsundere heroines anime fans have recently been accustomed to seeing.

Imagining that any anime series built around economics – much less a fantasy one – could possibly

have much appeal is, admittedly, a stretch, which makes how smoothly the plotting flows, and how much tension it can generate, all the more impressive. It pulls off intricate plots involving making a profit off of the devaluation of currency or trying to adapt to unexpected market forces with great aplomb, fascinating the viewer even while the intricacies of what exactly is happening may go over the heads of most. Oliver Stone's Wall Street showed how much of a thrill gambling big on market manipulations could be, and some of that same excitement carries through here. That the series does not have the confidence to let the conflict rely solely on that, instead insisting on infusing a distinct element of mortal danger into the two major story arcs, is one of the minor failings of the writing, but it does allow for ramping up the tension and gives the series' heroine excuses to strut her stuff in wolf form. Those scenes certainly do not disappoint, either in the action sense, the Holo-is-a-badass sense, or in terms of the impact her wolf form has on others, especially Lawrence.

The structure of the story consists of two major story arcs, the first covering episodes 1-6 and the second covering episodes 8-13, which each correspond to one of the first two novels. Sandwiched in between is "Wolf and a Tail of Happiness," an essentially plotless interim episode which explores another aspect of trade economics and is most significant for explaining Holo's modifications to her apparel between the first and second arcs. It was skipped in the original TV broadcast, instead being offered only as a DVD release special, but is included in proper order here. The commonly-cited minor knock against the writing generated by this structure is that the two novel-based arcs have repetitive structures: new characters are introduced in the first couple of episodes, the middle episodes involve Lawrence getting in deep in some kind of trade scheme that ultimately turns deadly-dangerous, and Holo has to take on her wolf form in the last episode to help bail out the situation. Given how much else Hasekura's original writing and Naruhisa Arakawa's screenplay adaptation do right, though, this fault can be overlooked. The sharp, witty byplay between Lawrence and Holo never gets old, the characterizations are a delight, and the plotting smoothly transitions between its typical leisurely pace and the more tense parts.

While the series has few true action scenes, it shows off its attention to animation detail in more subtle ways. The twitch of Holo's ears, or the swaying of her tail, in response to certain stimuli may seem like innocuous details but contribute to her character just as much as anything she says and can certainly help endear her to viewers. The animation also gives both Holo and Lawrence an unusually high variety of facial expressiveness by anime standards, though it takes some shortcuts elsewhere. Studio IMAGIN, which has not taken the lead on any other anime likely to be widely-recognized by American fans, does a fine job with that and other aspects of the show, especially Holo's intimidating wolf form, while retaining the visual style seen in the illustrations in the original novels. The artistry is arguably the series' weakest aspect, but even so it still presents distinctive and nicely-rendered characters set against convincingly European Middle Ages-styled backgrounds and with amusing little details, such as the miniature barrel-shaped mugs (complete with a "to go" stopper) seen late in the series. A slightly more earthy color scheme also helps. The lack of nipples shown in Holo's nude scenes is a throwback to an earlier era when such accommodation for TV-broadcasted series was more common; unlike with most recent series, which have made a habit of artificially obscuring things for the TV broadcast only to reveal them in the DVD release, the DVD version has not been spruced up.

If the artistry is the production's weakest aspect, the soundtrack may be its strongest. Yuuji Yoshino, whose only previous soundtrack effort of note was for .hack//Legend Of The Twilight, turns in an amazing effort here by producing one of the most novel and distinctive soundtracks ever likely to turn up in an anime. It grounds itself primarily in fiddle and accordion pieces occasionally complemented by banjo and/or mandolin, with recorder instrumentals for more playful moments and airy vocals for mystical moments, together creating a very folksy sound which suits the series supremely well. The melancholy "Tabi no Tochū" by Natsumi Kiyoura, which opens each episode, speaks to the underlying loneliness of Holo and Lawrence with both song and lyrics, while regular Engrish closer "Ringo Biyori The Wolf Whistling Song" provides an excellent closing complement by speaking to the series' less serious side. That this series' soundtrack is not commercially available in the States is criminal.

English voice actress Brina Palencia had big shoes to fill as Holo, as Ami Koshimizu's original rendition is one of the finest female seiyuu performances in recent years, but she handles it as well as can reasonably be expected. Her take on Holo gives the character a certain haughtiness which seems perfectly in line with Holo's personality, albeit at the sacrifice of the archaic style of speaking Holo had in the original performance. Brina hits all of the right emotional notes, though, and is generally on the mark with the quick, subtle shifts of tone and temper in Holo's fickle demeanor. J. Michael Tatum is a fine fit as Lawrence, as is Leah Clark in a key second-arc supporting role as Nora and John Burgmeier in a first-arc role as Zheren, with other significant supporting roles varying from mediocre to excellent in casting and performance. Both dubs clearly use recordings of actual wolf howls for scenes where Holo gives voice to her wolf side. The English script does some modifications in places, such as glossing over a couple of references to the name of Horo's home town (not so important in this first series, but much moreso in the second) and clearly putting into words one event in episode 13 which is only implied in the subtitles and original dub, but the only change likely to be a significant issue is one scene near the end where changing what Holo says causes her pose in the scene to lose context. Another slight issue is a scene where a fellow merchant calls Lawrence a "son of a gun" in both the English dub and subtitles, which may be an equivalent idiom but creates an anachronism given the apparent Renaissance era-patterned setting. (That idiom did not come into use until the 1700s.)

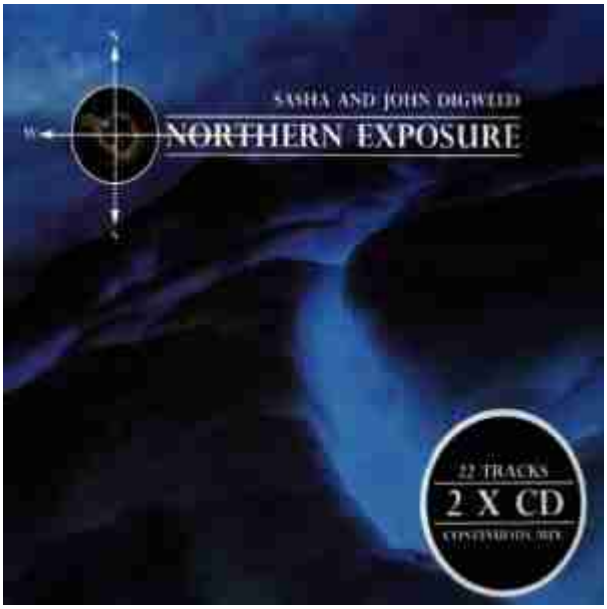
Funimation's release of the title includes no Extras beyond clean opener and closer on the second disk and some interior cover art; a shame, since an audio commentary on this one might have been interesting. Unlike most of Funi's seasonal boxed sets, this one comes in a regular DVD case with the first DVD on a hinged plastic divider. In the past such attempts have generally not worked well because the hinges easily break, but this one seems much sturdier. The front cover uses the original cover artwork for the second Japanese DVD, while the back cover uses cover artwork from the first Japanese DVD but with the green field in the background exchanged for a field of ripened wheat. Notably, this artwork shows Horo in younger-looking and more innocent poses than what she ever appears as in the series.

The naked wolf girl might get your attention, but the wonderful character dynamics and unique plots will keep you coming back. For those who have not yet had enough, a second season widely-acknowledged as being even better awaits. Help encourage Funimation to license that one, too.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : A-
Animation : B+
Art : B+
Music : A

+ Holo, byplay between lead characters, unique plots, musical score.
− Repetitive plot structure in its two arcs, climactic events feel a bit like bail-outs.

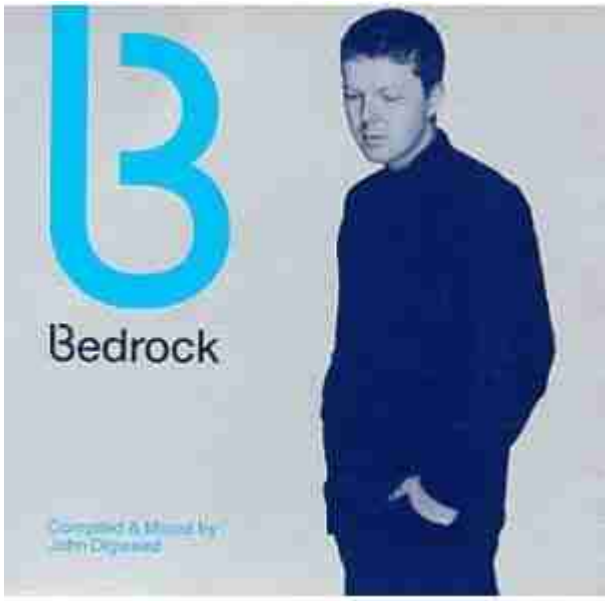
Best House CDs (2011-02-20 06:04)

1. Northern Exposure - Sasha - John Digweed

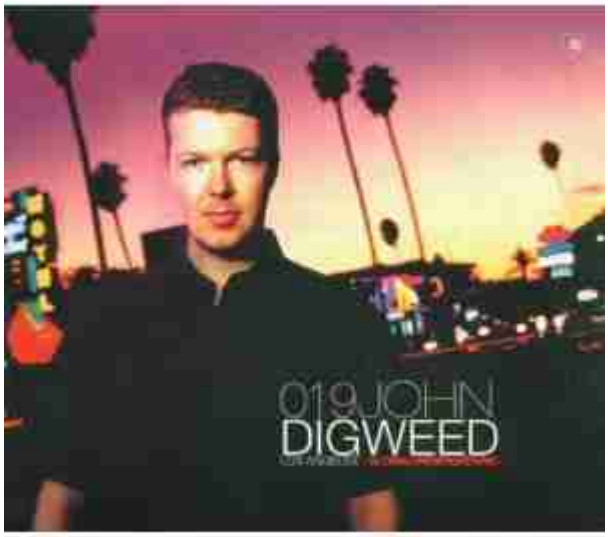


2. John Digweed - Structures

3. John Digweed - Bedrock

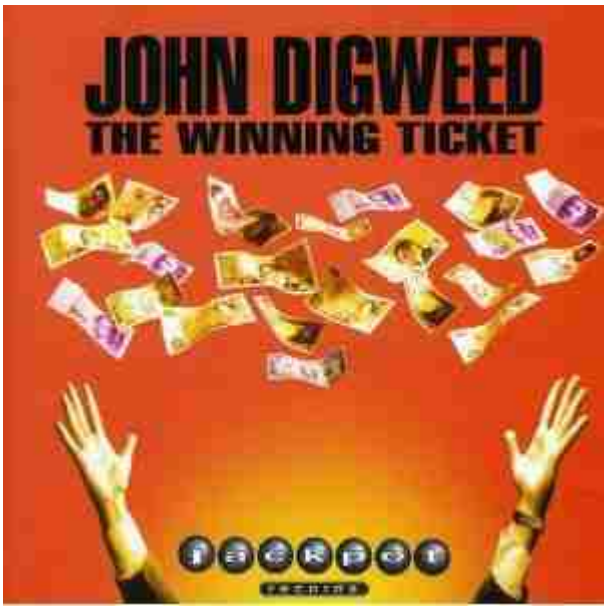


4. John Digweed - Global Underground 19: Los Angeles

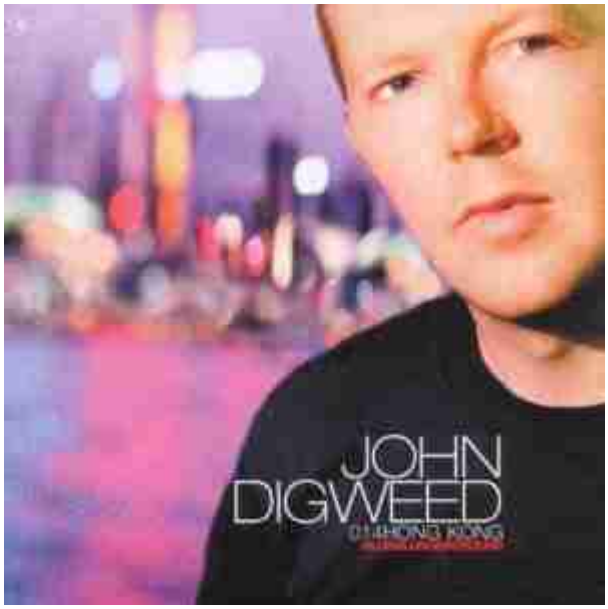


5. John Digweed - MMII

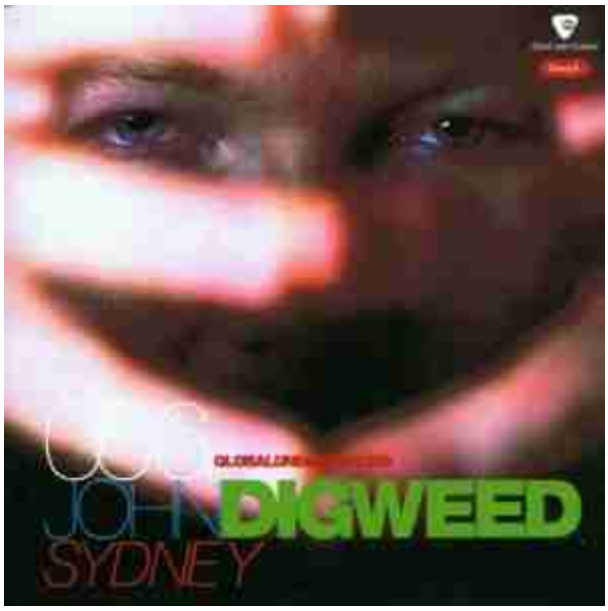
6. John Digweed - The Winning Ticket



7. John Digweed - Global Underground 14: Hong Kong



8. John Digweed - Global Underground 006: Sydney



9. Global Underground 10 - Athens - Danny Tenaglia

10. John Digweed - Transitions

The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya (2011-02-24 23:06)

Mikuru, a battle waitress from the future, must battle the evil alien witch Yuki to protect Itsuki, an innocent young man with unrealized psychic powers, from her clutches. . .

No, wait. Actually, first-year high school student Kyon's prospects for an ordinary high school life were shattered when Haruhi Suzimiya, the pretty, smart, and multitalented girl sitting behind him in homeroom stood up and introduced herself with the bold declaration that she was not interested in normal people, only "time-travelers, aliens, and espers." Daring to talk to her anyway, Kyon gets caught up in her schemes when, after finding the school's other clubs lacking, she takes his advice and forms her own, soon dubbed the SOS Brigade, with the stated goal of investigating "unusual occurrences" and with him as the

first draftee. Also dragged or cajoled into the club are bookworm Yuki (whose defunct Literary Club provides the club room), very moe upperclassman Mikuru (the mascot), and friendly Itsuki (the "mysterious transfer student"). What Kyon gradually discovers, but Haruhi herself utterly fails to realize, is that Haruhi has inadvertently surrounded herself with the very kind of people she was looking for, and they are all there to watch her because she is the most extraordinary one of them all.

Review:

An anime series made specifically for otaku usually fares no better than moderately well, as targeting it at whatever niche market it panders to inherently limits its potential appeal. Every so often, though, one finds just the right tone, or puts together just the right combination of gimmicks, to break beyond its limitations and become a smashing success. In 2006 that series was the megahit The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzimiya (hereafter MoHS), whose intrinsic oddity, bold characters, strong technical merits, and boatload of fan-pleasing gimmickry have won it immense popularity (or notoriety, depending on your point of view) in fan communities on both sides of the Pacific. Even its marketing campaign has been quite far off the beaten path, but one would expect nothing less from one of the most eccentric titles in recent years.

MoHS wastes no time in revealing its eccentricities. Episode 00, which starts off the series, is actually composed of a grainy, deliberately amateurish film which features key cast members playing out a disjointed and horribly clichéd story narrated in off-the-cuff fashion by the one main character we don't see in it; all part of a project made for a school festival, we later discover, and the reactions of the cast members to seeing the completed film are classic. To open a series with something so deliberately bad that it's funny may be risky, but it certainly caught the attention of fandom. The real story actually begins with the second episode, which is numbered Episode 01. Though a person could actually entirely skip the first episode and not miss anything important to the plot, the novelty of the experience would be lost, as would an appreciation for the cleverness of the foreshadowing used in it; one of the conceits of the first episode, which only becomes apparent later on, is that the roles the key cast members play in the film are actually uncannily close to their true natures. Another oddity came in the fourth broadcast episode, which originally jumped ahead to episode 7. This DVD release does not do this, however, instead opting to release the episodes in chronological rather than the scrambled broadcast order. While it costs the series some of its unique feel, the story does make more immediate sense this way.

Some of the series' charm also comes from the way it skewers assorted anime conventions and fandom peculiarities without exactly parodying them. It toys with the current Japanese otaku fascination with moe in the same way that a cat plays with a ball of yarn, addresses the "girl with glasses" fetish in two different ways, and unabashedly puts its two female leads in bunny costumes for the explicit purpose of exploiting sex appeal to gain attention. Its use of fan service carries a different feel from most other series, partly because it does not resort to the stereotypical tawdry reactions normally seen in more risqué anime comedies. Most importantly, it revels in finding clever ways to explain the inclusion of fan-fave elements like psychics, aliens, time-travelers, and (for all practical purposes) gods in a normal high school setting. There are even hints of an underlying romance, as Haruhi's actions subtly suggest that her deigning to carry on conversations with the completely normal Kyon, and getting him involved in her schemes, may have deeper implications.

For all its slick use of story oddities, though, the central characters are the heart of the series' appeal. For decades anime titles have been replete with bold, assertive female leads that buck Japanese societal norms, but the title character here is in a class by herself. Rather than rely on partial insanity, hyperactivity, or stupidity, as most such heroines do, Haruhi achieves her dominance through sheer force of personality. She

isn't crazy at all, as there is always a method to her seeming madness; she just has a unique world view, the audacity and aggressiveness to ruthlessly pursue it without being at all concerned with what others think, and apparently gets bored easily. Kyon, who also narrates, is at least as much of a delight as the low-key and somewhat cynical young man who increasingly finds himself mixed up in all the weirdness surrounding Haruhi and seems to lack the means (and possibly desire?) to extricate himself from it. He gets to see the big picture that Haruhi misses, which provides a window onto Haruhi's world for the viewer to watch and experience. Other key characters, though they may seem stereotypical, hold their own surprises, such as the placid, soft-spoken bookworm Yuki, who delivers onto Kyon a mass of startling revelations; much-suffering Mikuru, who actually has her own secret agenda despite appearing to be totally at Haruhi's mercy; and congenial Itsuki, who actually is a "mysterious transfer student" because of his own ulterior motives. A couple of other characters who have appeared so far also have hidden identities, though they are not revealed in this block of episodes.

MoHS is one of an increasing number of anime series based off of Japanese "lite novel" series rather than manga, and it adapts beautifully to animated form. Its scripting paces the first few episodes well, use of visual perspective and scene framing is consistently interesting, and the visuals bring out the full richness of its abnormalities while still retaining the context of an ordinary high school. That the visuals are also particularly eye-pleasing doesn't hurt. The distinctive, well-drawn, and clearly-defined character designs visually model the personality quirks of each character better than most series and provide just the right balance of cute and sexy for Haruhi and Mikuru, both of whom look especially good in the bunny costumes in Episodes 02 and (for Mikuru) 00. Quality scenery and background art contribute to a great overall look, while the animation is especially smooth and detailed for series anime; even the degree of background animation is unusually high. It shines brightest in the fully-animated dance number in the closer, which also has its characters lip-synching to the lyrics. Kyoto Animation proved on Full Metal Panic! Fumoffu? that it could produce high-quality work, and this is just another great example of that.

Also worth noting is that the DVD release has some slight alterations to the artwork used in the original broadcast episodes, primarily to correct minor inconsistencies that cropped up over the course of the series. A viewer who has seen the fansubbed episodes will have to be particularly astute to catch the exact changes, however, and only those who have seen the fansubs through to the end are likely to notice and appreciate the corrections.

The soundtrack remains unobtrusive throughout most of the content in these episodes, its job here only to subtly enhance the quirky or comical side of scenes rather play a lead role. It distinguishes itself much more in the J-Pop opener and closer, which are performed by Haruhi's seiyuu Aya Hirano and the trio of seiyuu for the female SOS Brigade members, respectively, although the animation steals the show in the closer.

The English dub has been of particular interest to fans, so Bang Zoom! has assembled an all-star cast for the job. The efficacy of the performances varies. Crispin Freeman has proven in the past that he can do the sardonic, put-upon male lead well (think Shannon in Scrapped Princess), so he is an ideal fit as Kyon, and Stephanie "Eureka/Orihime" Sheh so closely mimics the unique original vocal style for Mikuru that at times it can be hard to tell that it's a different actor doing the English role. Johnny Bosch works reasonably well as Itsuki, as do the performances in most supporting roles, but Michelle Ruff struggles to find the proper style for Yuki, with the monotone she has settled on sounding duller than it should. The key performance, of course, is Wendee Lee's rendition of Haruhi, which certainly has the tone, enthusiasm, and delivery style right but differs enough in inflection and vocal quality that it will take some getting used to for fans who have heard the original Japanese performance first.

The English script sticks close to the original, with only minor adjustments evident, but the En-

glish subtitles have made some odd choices in their translation. “Future man,” while it may be more literally accurate, does not sound as good as the “time traveler” used in the dub, nor does the truncation of the Data Integration Thought Entity referred to in episodes 02 and 03 to just “thought entity” despite being recited completely in the dub. The font used for the subtitles is a little larger than normal, which makes one wonder if screen space may have been an issue shaping these choices. Watching the series at least once dubbed-only is also advisable because the subtitles sometimes cover up meaningful on-screen text. Unfortunately releasing the episodes in chronological order has forced the replacement of the original catchy Next Episode spots, but that is a carry-over from the Japanese DVD release (which was also in chronological order).

Bandai Entertainment has not had a good track record of late for putting Extras on their releases, but the first volume of MoHS comes well-stocked. The DVD itself is marked with the SOS Brigade emblem, and includes Extras such as the clean opener and closer for Episode 00, live-action Japanese TV spots featuring Haruhi’s seiyuu, “Making of” clips that are actually about the live-action spots, and the original Next Episode previews from the TV broadcasts. Most notable is the inclusion of Parts 00, 01, and 02 of “The Adventures of the ASOS Brigade,” the video clips featuring Patricia Lee (of Power Rangers notoriety) and two of the original seiyuu that were used on the quirky ASOS Brigade website (www.asosbrigade.com) to help promote and make announcements about the series’ American release. Watching these will allow newcomers to appreciate how truly oddball the series’ promotion has been so far. The Limited Edition version also comes with a custom art box, a CD soundtrack, a double-sided pencil board, an iron-on patch, and a hair ribbon.

For all it cleverness, the first volume of MoHS does not portray it as an especially deep or philosophical title, and can be fairly accused of being derivative. Though many aspects of the series may provoke discussion, it is still, at heart, a humorous otaku funfest (albeit an extremely good one), and is best appreciated if one does not lose sight of that. Not everyone will “get” the series, especially if you’re a novice anime fan, but for those that do this is just the start of one hell of an entertaining ride.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : A
Animation : A
Art : A-
Music : B+

+ Clever, well-animated, good set of Extras.
− Not especially deep, Next Episode previews are a drag compared to the original.

Cute, multitalented Haruhi Suzimiya subconsciously has the power of a deity and the SOS Brigade she has formed secretly includes the time traveler, alien, and esper she sought out, who are there to keep tabs on her – so much for an ordinary high school experience for Kyon, the lone mundane member. Worse, it seems that Haruhi getting bored can have bad consequences for reality, and so could revealing any of the truth to her, so Kyon must figure out what all these cryptic references to fairy tales mean and why Haruhi wants him around when a worst-case scenario arises. It also seems that the SOS Brigades members are not the only extraordinary individuals at the school, and one definitely does not have Kyon’s best interests in mind. Later on, the SOS Brigade finds itself in a baseball tournament when Haruhi signs them up on a whim.

Review:

For those who have not seen MoHS in fansubs, ardent fans have much lamented the switch to chronological ordering of the episodes on the DVD releases compared to the scrambled order of the original TV broadcast. That difference starts making its full impact here. The great advantage to having episodes 4-7 (remember, the first episode was episode 0) in this order is that the story makes a heck of a lot more sense this way, especially with episode 7 ("The Boredom of Haruhi Suzimiya", aka the baseball episode) coming after the episodes which actually explain the whole business about closed spaces, the strange giants, what Koizumi's power is, and why it's so important to monitor Haruhi's mood. Some who saw the series in fansubs argue that easily making sense comes at the cost of the novelty of the out-of-order approach, but unlike the similarly-disordered Boogiepop Phantom the original scrambled order felt more like a gimmick than an actual integral part of the storytelling, so no big loss. Those who are going to get hung up on that can just start buying the Limited Edition versions from this point out, as the extra disc included in them provides a subtitled-only version of the series in the original broadcast order – an option not even available on the Japanese DVDs.

The one true negative so far to releasing the episodes in chronological order is that episode 6, which was the final broadcast episode, gives every indication of being a series closer despite the series being only halfway done. Will the remaining seven episodes feel only like denouement once the moment has passed? If the way episode 7 plays out is any indication, the potential impact of this negative is being overestimated. The series still has as much fun eccentricity going on as ever, and the story does still continue past what is seen in episode 6.

If you leave all the order-changing baggage aside, what you have left is an enormously fun series which remains a complete otakufest while not quite taking the traditional path. As the second volume proves once again, channeling the viewpoint through Kyon instead of through the title character or a neutral perspective is a brilliant move and one of many factors which separates the series from lesser efforts of its type. Never excitable and yet still fully a red-blooded teenage male, his sardonic running commentary makes him one of the year's best male characters. In these four episodes the romantic potential between him and Haruhi becomes more heavily implied, but unlike so many other teen-focused series, it's never more than implied; Kyon never admits that the reason he keeps hanging around Haruhi despite all the hassles she gives him is because he may be attracted to her, and one has to read Haruhi's utterly unadmitted interest in Kyon from her actions rather than watch her fantasize about him. On Haruhi's part, her moodiness and frustration over the inability to recognize and identify all the weirdness surrounding her makes the title of the series more clear.

But the two main characters aren't the only reason to watch. The personalities of the key supporting cast members also become more distinct, Yuki finally gets to make extensive use of her (essentially magical) data manipulation abilities, and we finally get to see how Koizumi's powers work, too. The threat to Kyon comes up suddenly and out of the blue but makes senses within a certain twisted frame of thinking, and its consequences aren't ignored. Plenty enough weirdness goes on to keep the content from ever getting boring, and in a deeper sense the series can hold a great appeal for those who share Haruhi's viewpoint that the ordinary world isn't interesting enough. A few doses of action, spilled blood, misinterpreted scenes, details in background scenes (especially in episode 4) and minor fan services don't hurt, but like everything else the series does, it doesn't handle any of these normally. Also watch for the occasional eccentricity in the credits, too.

The artistry also continues to excel, with some occasional nice CG effects, good background art, and pleasing character designs which offer some fan service without being too blatant about it, all using a distinctive color scheme that is a bit more earthy and subdued than the normal bright displays. Character facial expressions are a particular delight to watch, especially in the way they illustrate the many moods

of Haruhi or the blasé attitude of Kyon. The highlight comes in episode 4 in a scene where Haruhi merely glares at Kyon while he chews her out for her rash use of pictures of Mikuru. That is an expression you almost never see on girls in anime, and though brief it is also priceless, both for how it looks and the meaning it carries. The quality of the animation also shines through in both ordinary scenes and the action sequences, especially in the dance sequences in the closer.

The soundtrack, while not a stand-out individually, continues to do a great job of subtly enhancing each scene and setting the mood. The opener only gets used on episodes 5 and 7, and the closer is absent on episode 6, but both sound good when present.

Hard-core fans consider the performance of seiyuu Aya Hirano as Haruhi to be a legendary effort, and indeed it is hard to imagine the role being done any better in Japanese. That makes some big shoes for Wendee Lee to fill, but she isn't one of the most experienced of all anime-related English voice actors for nothing, and once one gets used to her voice in the role the caliber of her performance can be appreciated. Ms. Lee has often given her best efforts when voicing petulant characters, and while her performance here may not be the equal of the original, it's good enough. Crispin Freeman, who has proven in the past to be very good with sardonic characters, nails the key role of Kyon, even getting the right inflection in scenes where Kyon lets his mind wander in more naughty directions, and Stephanie Sheh gives an admirable effort in emulating the original performance for Mikuru. Other performances are acceptable. The English script does not stray too much from the subtitles, although it sometimes makes colorful adaptations; for instance, at one point an exclamation of "Huge!" becomes "Super-Size me!"

As with its first volume, the regular edition of volume 2 loads up on Extras. Clean opener and closer and the original episode previews from the TV broadcast constitute the more ordinary extras, with others including two more "Making Of" featurettes, one focusing on a photo shoot involving the three lead female seiyuu and the other focusing on Aya Hirano recording a song that comes up later in the series. A pair of brief "Nekoman Galleries" only make sense if you watch the "Making Of" featurettes first, and of course the on-DVD highlights are the next four installments of the live-action "Adventures of the ASOS Brigade" promo bits, which are stupid, campy fun, especially the one involving Crispin Freeman's recording session. (That he can do that with a straight face is either a sign of his caliber as an actor or a sign of multiple takes.) As always, the credits on those are worth reading. The Special Limited Edition box set gets you the aforementioned second DVD, which contains the first five broadcast-order episodes in subtitled-only form. Also included are the audio CD single for the opener, a double-sided picture plate, a good-sized iron-on Haruhi emblem, and an Ultra Director armband that is an exact replica of the one Haruhi has been seen wearing in the intro and Episode 0.

Whether a newcomer to the title or an established fan fulfilling obligations to purchase the DVDs for the fansubs you've watched, the second volume offers a lot of entertainment value in both its episodes and Extras. It may be a fan-focused series, but it elevates itself above most others of its type through good storytelling, superior technical merits, and by avoiding descending into the most puerile levels of fan-pandering.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A
Overall (sub) : A
Story : A
Animation : A-
Art : A
Music : A-

+ Great characters and storytelling, lots of fun content.
− Debates over the episode order.

Haruhi's melancholy now apparently cured, the biggest threat to the world as we know it is her boredom. An idle Haruhi is a dangerous thing, so it's probably for the best that she has the SOS Brigade to keep her busy. The brigade gets a request from a girl to find her missing boyfriend, who just happens to be the poor computer club president that Haruhi railroaded into giving the SOS Brigade his best PC. Naturally this all leads to the brigade going head-to-head with a giant extraterrestrial camel cricket. Later Itsuki invites the entire club to a newly-constructed mansion on a deserted island. Haruhi hears "deserted island" and automatically thinks "super-sleuth." Which spells big trouble for everyone, 'cause how can you have a super-sleuth without a murder?

Review:

At the center of The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya lies a question asked by everyone from the Wachowski brothers to a small platoon of science fiction writers and nearly every disaffected teenager in America: "What if the world really did revolve around you?" It isn't a question unknown in the anime world; Paranoia Agent and Lain brushed up against the question and other shows have tackled the subject head-on with varying degrees of success (does anyone remember Interlude?). The key to Haruhi's success is to approach the question with intelligence and wrap its musings in a conventional (if originally nonlinear) entertainment that doesn't skimp on humor, style, or characterization. That something can meld paranormal stereotypes, moe, romantic comedy and semi-hard science fiction into one perfectly seamless whole may be a difficult proposition to sell to skeptics, but that's exactly what Haruhi does.

This third volume, however, isn't quite Haruhi at its prime. There's a dearth of brain-tickling sci-fi ponderings this volume, largely attributable to the fact that two thirds of the volume is spent on a murder mystery of a decidedly more Earthly nature. The mystery of Haruhi takes a backseat, and the discussion of observer effects and questions about the nature of reality are more a matter of flavoring than of serious consideration. Still, even when running in place for a bit, the series outpaces most of its competition. Naturally, Haruhi's influence on reality gives the perfect excuse for the contrived mystery setup (ripped straight from any of a hundred fictional mysteries), and that fact is cleverly worked into the mystery itself. Even if the two-part mystery is far too easily solved by a little application of logic (independent of any of the clues) and the sci-fi angle isn't really worked, every episode still provides a virtual smörgåsbord of the other qualities that make the show such a blast to watch. The series' sharp oddball humor continues to prove that a show doesn't have to be stupid or frivolous to be funny; its mildly disorienting approach to story-telling is wielded in amusing ways; the cast continues to grow strongly on one (despite not being terribly deep); and there's even a little romance as Kyon and Haruhi grow a bit closer.

Kyoto Animation forgoes large-scale actions and complicated camera movements in exchange for animating characters that are actually animated. Of course, even though everyone moves in uncharacteristically realistic ways and has a wide array of expressions and motions, Haruhi is special. Haruhi is the show, and the animators know it. She's simply a joy to watch; she never sits still for a moment and her personality fairly bleeds from her face and body language. The animators know exactly when to punctuate her actions with a shift in expression, a blink, or some other incidental but infinitely meaningful detail. Combine that with her sassy, distinctive design and you have an entity that embodies exactly the energy that makes her such an irresistible force of nature, believably communicating both her half-insane idiosyncratic personality and her almost pathetic desperation to live a life less ordinary. The rest of the cast features strong designs and fluid animation (with a marked preference for the female members), but are never allowed—quite rightfully—to

approach Haruhi in terms of visual appeal (or any other type of appeal for that matter).

With the exception of Kyon, that is. He hasn't as flashy a part, but his snide running commentary is crucial to the series' humor, helped by a lot of mouth-obscuring compositions that allow the director to play off the uncertainty of whether his dialogue is internal or external. Kyon's caustic wit and intelligence also make him something of an anomaly among the sea of personalityless male leads. His importance is such that the slower tempo of his English rendition, and the attendant loss of the original's breathless quality, actually has a noticeable effect on the overall tempo of the show. The extreme fidelity of the dub is actually a bit of a liability in this case, as a wordier, looser adaptation would have preserved the feel of his internal monologue better. Which is, of course, the grand bull-moose of petty nit-picking criticisms. Crispin Freeman does a fine job in the role, as does the rest of the cast with theirs. Those for whom a dub is important will hardly mind, or even notice, the difference and the vast majority of the series' appeal makes the transition to English intact.

Given the quality of the others, saying that the music is the weakest of the series' technical qualities really isn't a very strong criticism. It only means that it supports the visuals, manipulates mood (the score is particularly effective at heightening energy), and is occasionally utilized in unusual ways. That it doesn't cling to the mind like jingle is probably more an advantage than a drawback. Both the opening and the ending are fun songs that are completely overpowered by the visuals.

The almost bewildering array of art galleries, interviews, behind-the-scenes footage and other extras continues. This is as comprehensive a collection of extras as anyone could reasonably desire. The "Adventures of the ASOS Brigade" also continue, with three new installments. On top of (attempted) entertainment, they also provide some welcome interviews with the English cast.

This isn't the best volume of Haruhi to date. Which doesn't mean squat in terms of its domination of the other comedies on the market, a fact that speaks volumes for the series' overall quality. It remains pure fun with a healthy respect for its audience's intelligence...not something readily found in any entertainment format.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : B+
Animation : A-
Art : B+
Music : B

+ Excellent pair of leads; funny and thoroughly entertaining with a dash of romance.
− De-emphasizes the sci-fi element; murder mystery is too obvious for all the care lavished on it.

"The Adventures of Mikuru-chan" is finally in the can, so Kyon decides to enjoy the school cultural festival as much as possible. He is in for a shock, though, when none other than the bunny suit-clad Haruhi steps on stage as a substitute lead vocalist for the all-girl rock band ENOZ during their Rock Club stage performance and blows the crowd away with her surprising singing ability. Later, the heavily put-upon Computer Club challenges the SOS Brigade to duel using a computer tactical space battle game to regain lost face and the computer Haruhi extorted from them months earlier, but what will happen when Yuki actually seems to be enjoying herself? A later lazy winter day finds Kyon going into town to fetch a heater for the club room while Haruhi finagles the helpless Mikuru into more photo ops.

Review:

Of the complaints fans of the series have made about MOHS's DVD releases (both in North America and in Japan) being done in chronological rather than the scrambled original broadcast order, the most justifiable one concerns the way the series ends. In the original broadcast the episode "The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya VI" actually aired last, offering the series some semblance of a climax and resolution, but "The Melancholy of Suzumiya XIII," which actually is last chronologically and marks the end of this volume, is just there. It delivers no climax, drama, or weirdness at all beyond some goofiness in dodging displays of fan service, nor does it give any sense of completion. It's just a mundane, lazy, slice-of-life episode with a faint hint of a Kyon/Haruhi relationship development that you might expect to find in the middle of a series, or as the quiet before a storm, rather than at its end. It does make more sense in story context than when originally broadcast, has its moments, and actually is not bad overall, but even those watching the series for the first time are going to get to the end of the last episode and scratch their heads while saying, "okay, where's the rest of it?"

Other than that, the last volume is a smashing success. The "computer duel" episode provides great fun as it rounds out the simmering resentment of the Computer Club and recaptures the playful, enthusiastic spirit that helped make the series so great, but the real gem is the school festival episode, which shows the series at its very best. Those who watch it carefully in the first half might notice important events going on in the backgrounds of several scenes as more ordinary school festival occurrences progress in the foreground, events which set up what is unquestionably the series' best individual scene: Haruhi's on-stage performance with ENOZ. Just watching the reactions of Kyon and the crowd around him can be a blast, but they pale in comparison to the great rock songs "God Knows" and "Lost My Music" and the beautifully meticulous animation of their performances. Kyoto Animation deserves enormous praise for animating the finger movements on the guitar and bass so carefully that the performers actually appear to be playing the notes you hear, and one of the "Making of" Extras suggests that Haruhi's singing was actually animated around seiyuu Aya Hirano's recording, which makes for one of the most accurate lip-synching jobs you'll ever see in an animated singing performance. Kyoto Animation even paid attention to fine details like the beads of sweat rolling off of Haruhi's face as she performs. During the scene and afterwards viewers also get to see a side of Haruhi not previously seen in the series, the side which is a little uncomfortable with actually being appreciated. For everything that the episode does, it is well worth watching multiple times (which may be necessary to catch all the background details), and in both languages.

And that is another thing which makes the episode so remarkable: the caliber of the vocals in the songs. Given that she sings the opener and contributes to singing the closer, everyone knew that Aya Hirano could sing, so the real discovery is that her English counterpart Wendee Lee, who has mostly been holding her own in the role, can actually match her on the songs, too. (Anyone who does not believe this should flip back and forth between the dubs during the performances and compare. Even diehard purists may not notice a difference in quality.) Crispin Freeman still masters the role of Kyon like he was born for it, while other roles will still come down to normal sub-dub preferences for most viewers.

The musical score does not have to rely just on its insert songs to get a high grade this time around, as its space opera themes suitably enhance the "computer duel" episode and more subtle themes evoke appropriate mood elsewhere. The same could also be said of the always-appealing artistry and crisp animation, which occasionally takes some shortcuts but goes all-out on detail in feature scenes. It even uses multilayered animation, such as the scene where Kyon and Itsuki are talking while the crowd goes wild behind them. The visuals so carefully avoid fan service to that it becomes a joke, unless you qualify high school girls in sharp maid outfits or Haruhi back in her bunny suit at fan service.

As with previous volumes, Bandai Entertainment has loaded even the regular release up with Extras. Nearly all of them are in the same vein as those seen in previous volumes: a Neko-Man gallery, "Making of" features which this time focus on the adorably cute Aya Hirano during promo tours and visits to Kyoto Animation, original episode previews, and the last three installments of "The Adventures of the ASOS Brigade," which include a visit to an authentic Akihabara maid café, brief introductions of all of the principle seiyuu, and a live-action performance of the closer dance by the ASOS Brigade girls. The new entries this time are the full animated version of the closer dance, the introduction for the guests of honor from Anime Expo 2007, and a special Haruhi-themed teaser for Lucky Star, Kyoto Animation's latest effort. The Limited Edition version also includes a Haruhi iron-on, SOS Brigade pillow case, a pencil board, an extra DVD with the subbed-only broadcast-order versions of episodes 11-14, and the Haruhi no Tsumeawase OST CD.

While this volume may not be as thoroughly eccentric as earlier installments and lacks a proper ending for the series, it nonetheless offers great entertainment with a lot of replay value and does advance the hinted-at Haruhi/Kyon romance a bit. MOHS may be over (for now), but its impact and popularity will live on.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : B+
Animation : A
Art : A-
Music : A

+ Wonderful insert songs, beautifully animated performances.
− Lack of a proper ending when episodes are viewed in chronological order.

Twelve Kingdoms (2011-02-27 23:10)

Twelve Kingdoms DVD 1

Brought to you by Studio Pierrot, the same production company that animated Fushigi Yuugi, The Twelve Kingdoms initially follows the same setup: Schoolgirl and Friend get sucked into ancient China-like place that is not, in fact, ancient China, can't get back home, and have antics. However whereas the popularity of Fushigi Yuugi is powered by the characters' relationships, The Twelve Kingdoms focuses more on individual character development through carefully organized plot and a fantastic array of supporting characters.

Based on a popular fantasy novel series by Fuyumi Ono, The Twelve Kingdoms follows the story of Yoko Nakajima, a quiet and extremely self-conscious girl who is obedient to her parents and respected by teachers and students. When a mysterious man appears at her school, Yoko is taken through a portal in the sea and soon finds herself lost and abandoned in another world and pursued by creatures both mythical and

malevolent. Yoko initially deals with this the same way that many insecure, confused, and frightened anime heroines have (and scores no points whatsoever with anybody): by crying, and then whining, and finally breaking down (over and over and over). However, as she is forced to deal with a string of betrayals and to accept that she may never return home, Yoko shows evidence of an inner strength that will likely transform her into a truly heroic character.

When an anime is more dependent on plot and characterization than action, one of the most important supporting factors ends up being the choice of voice talent, and in that both the Japanese and English cast shine. The Japanese seiyuu cast is led by Aya Hisakawa (Yuki in Fruits Basket, Ami in Sailor Moon, Haruka in RahXephon) as Yoko, who is supported by no less than Yuji Ueda (as Asano, one of Yoko's friends) and Takehito Koyasu (as the "mysterious man," Keiki) both formerly of Fushigi Yuugi. While one might question the casting of the deep-voiced Koyasu as a delicate, white-haired kirin, as per usual he does an excellent job and by the end of the volume it's inconceivable that the character be played by anyone else. Oddly, Koyasu's opposite number on the English cast initially reminded me of Casey Kasem, but that impression also disappeared over time. The only member of the main english cast that remains an annoyance is Joshua Seth as Asano: the voice seems too young for the character. On a definite plus side for the dub, the actors made a valiant effort to pronounce an extraordinary amount of Japanese words, with mostly positive results – an impressive feat when you consider that the show is sprinkled with not only Japanese names but also series-specific terms such as "kaikyaku," "youma," and "shoku."

Even if the lingo confuses you, Twelve Kingdoms is still worth watching simply for the sake of the animation. The character designs are based off pictures drawn by the author, and the detail portrayed in the novels is brought to vivid life in the anime. Each character or creature Yoko encounters has a unique look, and a startling amount of attention was devoted to sketching in patterns on fur or clothing. A scene as simple as a kirin walking across a glade is gorgeous to behold, simply to ogle the lines of the hair.

The background artists also did some serious world-building, creating detailed decorations on and in buildings and washing everything in dusky yellow tones and bright colors that contrast sharply with the drab greens and grays of Yoko's present day Japan.

Enhancing the animation is a beautiful soundtrack arranged by Kunihiko Ryo, whose pieces add to the dynastic feel with an ancient Chinese folk music flare.

While the anime itself wins points for presentation, extras-enthusiasts may not find the DVD worth the price. Five episodes are included in the first volume, but besides those episodes and the option of watching the opening creditless (which isn't particularly interesting, considering the opening is essentially all still pictures), there are only the standard previews for other AnimeWorks series. Included in the DVD case is a two-page pamphlet with a small world map and a list of terms and creatures, but as far as extras go, that's all, folks.

As with any good book, ninety percent of the enjoyment should come out of getting to the conclusion – unfortunately, in an anime format, a story originally structured as a novel may seem to drag to people used to a climax and a conclusion every episode. Based on this first volume, Twelve Kingdoms promises a good story for those in it for the long haul, but anyone not looking for a commitment should probably look elsewhere.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A+
Story : A

Animation : A
Art : A+
Music : A

+ Beautiful art, a complex and interesting storyline
− Slow to get into

The stories of Yoko, Shokei, and Suzu become inextricably entwined as the rebels make their move. Her real identity still unknown to those around her, Yoko lends her blade and minions to the cause of overthrowing Shoko and rescuing Enho, while allies make a strike against Gahou, Shoko's master, in an effort to draw the Queen's attention to what has been transpiring in Wa Province. Corruption runs to the highest levels in the kingdom of Kei, however, and the disposition of the deeply troubled Asano must also be considered. The time has arrived for Yoko to prove, both to herself and to others, that she has the mettle required to become a proper Queen.

Review:

If you have not been following the storyline of Twelve Kingdoms prior to this point then this volume is a bad place to get on board, as extensive familiarity with what has come before is both assumed and required. For those who have followed the series since its beginning, though, this is an exceptionally satisfying volume. The dramatic build-up with which episode 35 ended is well capitalized-upon in the first four episodes as the "A Great Distance in the Wind, the Sky at Dawn" story arc is brought to a decisive conclusion, but in many ways this volume also represents the culmination of the entire series to date. Issues which have been lingering throughout the series (including Asano's fate) are resolved by the end of the climatic episode 39, which sees Yoko finally fully embrace her destiny and make her dramatic first ordinance as Queen. Though the subject of the ordinance may surprise some at first, everything which Yoko has experienced since the beginning of the series has built a logical progression towards it. Unlike some decisions she made earlier in her role as Queen, this ordinance is well-reasoned and strongly reflective both of her and of the kingdom she wants to build. It is a brilliant stroke of dramatic storytelling which would have provided a fine ending to the series as a whole had the producers chosen to cut the story off at that point. Instead the story continues on with episode 40, an interlude episode which clears up several loose ends from the "A Great Distance" story arc and leads into the next one—which must be either short or unfinished since there's only one volume of episodes left. (I have heard it said that fans who don't wish to be left hanging should stop after episode 39, though I cannot at this time personally attest to the accuracy of this statement.)

Although this volume of episodes focuses more heavily on Yoko than the previous volumes in the "A Great Distance" story arc, both Shokei and Suzu still get a fair amount of screen time. Unlike Yoko, they have already worked out their issues, so their relegation more towards supporting roles in this volume should come as no surprise. They play only minor parts in the action of these episodes, but their importance is greater as peers with whom Yoko can casually commiserate with, something which she has been sorely lacking since coming to the world of Twelve Kingdoms. The half-mad Asano also gets his fair share of screen time, and numerous villains and supporting characters who have been making regular appearances throughout the series continue to do so.

Twelve Kingdoms is best characterized as a drama set in a rich and meticulously-developed fantasy world, but this block of episodes sees a higher action quotient than most volumes in the series. The extensive attention to character development which has been a hallmark of the series continues, however. As fascinating as the world of Twelve Kingdoms is, the way its storytelling allows its characters to grow and change over time is just as compelling. The Yoko that we see by the end of episode 39 is not the same young woman who first came to this world, or even the same one who set out to covertly learn more about her kingdom at the

beginning of this story arc. Though some of the lessons have been harsh, one cannot help but empathize with characters who gradually learn to overcome their weaknesses and faults and not only become a better people for it but also become more likeable characters in the process. The transformations which Shokei and Suzu underwent in the previous volume become a guide for Yoko's own final steps towards completion and offer the series one of its strongest selling points.

Twelve Kingdoms has long been remarkable for its pretty character designs and gorgeous costuming, but this block of episodes offers little that's new or exciting on those fronts. Overall the artistry seems a little off compared to earlier volumes, especially in the integration of character animation with CG backgrounds in some places. The animation is a mixed bag: some scenes (especially when Yoko is sword-fighting) sparkle, while others (especially when characters are running as a group) look awkward. The opener and closer, and the fact that they are only presented in their English adaptations, remain unchanged from the earliest episodes. Only episode 39, which bookends the unique Japanese opening and closing credits with the traditional English versions of the opener and closer, deviates from the norm. The musical themes are the same as those used throughout the series; if you liked the soundtrack before, you'll still like it now.

Despite the wealth of action and violence in this volume, the graphic content continues to be kept to a minimum. Killings abound but very little blood is depicted in any of them and the series regularly pulls its punches on showing anything gruesome. Although it may be a little strong for a PG rating, this part of the series isn't strong enough to truly deserve PG-13. I wouldn't hesitate about showing it to a mature 10-year-old.

The English dub, whose cast is composed mostly of veteran English voice actors, continues to be strong. Although the voices don't always match well with those of the original Japanese actors, rarely did I hear a case where the voice didn't match well with the character. Koshou is one case in particular where I felt that the English casting was an improvement, as James Lyon lends him the deep, rich voice that he looks like he should have but which the seiyuu could not manage. Kate Davis and Mia Lee give Shoukei and Suzu voices which sound a bit younger and, surprisingly, have a bit higher pitch than the original seiyuu; they sound more appropriate to me in the roles, but that may be just my personal preference. Kurt Strauss, on the other hand, continues to be a bit of a disappointment as Keiki, although interestingly his voice is not given the enhanced resonance that the voice of his seiyuu counterpart was given. Most English performances follow the style and tenor of the original Japanese vocals closely enough that the original director has stated that he is pleased with them. A comparison of the subtitles with the English script (which an "English With Subtitles" menu option allows) reveals no major discrepancies in translation.

If there's one area where this volume of Twelve Kingdoms is a big disappointment, it's in its complete lack of extras beyond trailers. Earlier volumes had glossaries in the liner notes but even these have been dropped for later ones. This is partly offset by packing five episodes onto the DVD, but even so there should be at least something here. I must also express my annoyance with the way the Scene Access menu is set up, as you have to flip through the earlier episodes on "Next/Previous" buttons to get to the later ones. Another submenu which allows you to jump to any episode would be preferable.

If you have followed Twelve Kingdoms to this point, then volume 9 should be a priority view. If you're looking for an excellent fantasy series with well-developed characters and setting then I recommend checking out earlier volumes first and working your way up to this one. You won't be disappointed.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : A

Animation : B
Art : B
Music : B+

+ Beautiful costuming and character design, superior character development
− lack of DVD extras, certain menu issues

1.2 March

Fullmetal Alchemist review (2011-03-01 20:53)

Fullmetal Alchemist has become the biggest multimedia phenomenon to hit Japan since .hack went big nearly two years ago, and rightfully so. There's a plethora of big-name companies that got in on the action. What was originally the brain child of creator Hiromu Arakawa and Square Enix (best known for the Final Fantasy video games) has gone on to involve such prominent companies as Bandai (video games and merchandise), Sony (soundtrack), Shounen Gangan (manga serialization), and, of course, Studio BONES coming through with the animation. Each name acts as a stone pillar, supporting Fullmetal Alchemist in every way imaginable. From novels to bath towels, Fullmetal Alchemist is everywhere.

Fortunately, the anime lives up to the unnatural amount of hype that surrounds it.

When watching the show for the first time you'll find that this isn't your average series about magic and monsters. This series involves the scientific marvel known as alchemy. Unlike magic, which can make something out of nothing, alchemy follows the law of even trade, making something out of something. Of course, watching a guy turn water into salt wouldn't make for a very entertaining series, so FA takes things to a much more imaginative level. By using certain circular symbols called "transmutation circles" (some also call these "arrays"), a house can be made out of rubble, or a sword from a chunk of metal. However, as with everything, there are some rules that should never be broken.

This is where our aspiring protagonists come into play. The young brothers Edward and Alphonse Elric have lost their mother to a rare illness and are unable to contact their father who's been away. To fill this void in their lives, the boys turn to a study of alchemy. It isn't long after their informal training that they attempt the most forbidden of alchemic crafts: Human Transmutation. They fail.

The price is high, as Ed loses both his entire right arm and his lower left leg, and Al loses everything. Using quick thinking, Ed grafts Al's spirit to a full suit of armor using alchemy before passing out from the pain and blood loss. Likewise Al makes use of his new body to take Ed to their adoptive family, the Rockbells. It is here that Ed is fitted with a type of prosthetic called "automail," a Rockbell specialty that allows for a full range of motion and added strength.

While recovering, the pair is offered a chance to be students at a special academy that will give them a shot at becoming State Alchemists ("government-issued" alchemists). Ed and Al see this as an opportunity not only to better their understanding of alchemy, but also to further research human transmutation, hopefully to regain their former bodies. To do this they find they'll need an item that will amplify their abilities, the Philosopher's Stone. It's with this that their biggest adventure begins.

Much of the earlier story is told as the real story of FA progresses. The current story actually

takes place about 5 years after the events that set the brothers on their path. Learning about events that have taken place in the past helps promote interest in what is a long, complex story full of well rounded characters. Everyone has a past to explore. The past is just as important as the present, and viewers will want to understand both series of events well. It goes beyond the Elric brothers' search for answers as all chains of events become intertwined at one point or another.

The constant reviving of previous story arcs does much to keep the series fresh. By reintroducing characters that aren't expected to return, the entertainment level rises greatly. Throwing in one plot twist after another only increases the anticipation of each episode.

Fullmetal Alchemist has full of some of the most interesting and well-rounded characters you'll see in an anime. Thanks to the connections between past and present in the story, we learn much about the characters in a short length of time. We also get ample opportunity to watch the characters develop. In some cases it's as simple as a State Alchemist rising in military rank, but other times it's more personal, like a birthday. The characters mature, and as they reflect on their past lives, we often see changes in morals or ambitions.

Be warned, though: Don't trust anybody in the show. One of the greatest things about this series is the ability to mislead the viewers into a false sense of security. Motives and intents change rapidly; the nicest character can quickly become the vilest. And of course, it goes both ways.

We also witness some of anime's best character designs. You'll never confuse characters in Fullmetal Alchemist, as each character has a distinct appearance. Some very calculated care was taken to make sure that no two characters looked even remotely alike. It's especially important because most characters are part of the military and, thus, will be seen mainly in their uniforms. The one exception is Ed, who almost always wears variations on his familiar black suit and red coat.

The animation is squeaky clean. The colors are bright and vivid; even dull hues appear to glow. The animation is always flooded with colors–but never to the point that it becomes too busy or painful to watch. In some sequences they even use real photos of historical events like World War II. In other cases they use computer generated rooms and perfectly animate the characters within them, leaving a pleasant, uniform look to the animation.

Equally as impressive is the music. So far we've had opening and ending themes by such popular artists as Porno Graffitti, L'Arc en Ciel, YeLLOW Generation, and Crystal Kay to name a few. As of this writing there are still two more top names being added to the soundtrack, bringing the total to eight for this series' fifty-episode run. Thanks not only to the variety of artists, but also the different styles that each one brings to the table, the music is never boring and worth taking the couple of minutes to listen to every time. Anyone who's familiar with the quality of music that Square Enix includes in their games should know what to expect from Fullmetal Alchemist. Much of the background music is fully orchestrated, often relying on the use of woodwinds and percussions that are pleasing to the ear and in no way distract from any talking taking place.

One last thing: If you should happen to doubt the popularity of Fullmetal Alchemist, then check this out. Recently Square Enix announced they'd received a much higher than expected profit for the last fiscal year (3/2003 to 3/2004) and attributed this to three things: The popularity of Dragon Quest V in Japan, the popularity of Final Fantasy X-2 in the US and Europe, and the popularity of the Fullmetal Alchemist manga in Japan. So yes, it's that big.

Story : A

Animation : A+

Art : A

Music : A+

\+ High quality animation for a TV series, Engaging story and characters
− They do like to reinforce plot points a bit too often, especially before each opening theme

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Baccano! review (2011-03-10 21:03)

Baccano! begins as a shattered series of unconnected fragments delivered with a big meta-fictional wink by a mismatched pair of journalists. That there should tell you something. Baccano! is pure chaos, anarchy delivered with a sneaky underlying structure that eventually brings all of its fragments together to form a thrilling, blackly humorous whole that makes perfect sense so long as you don't probe too hard for meaning. After all, as those journalists make clear from the beginning, meaning is subjective and therefore meaningless. What else did you expect from a series whose title literally means "ruckus?"And what a ruckus it is. Baccano! replaces your standard main character with a huge cast of criminals, lowlifes, adventurers and psychopaths who bounce off of one another like balls in a lottery drawing. It has not one but three main plots. Depending on how you count it can be more. One involves the search by mafia killers and a young girl for the girl's ne'er-do-well street punk brother. Another features a rogue's gallery of underworld types knocking around the back alleys of New York: inept thieves, immortal alchemists, petty hoods, beautiful homunculi, ruthless perhaps-Irish bootleggers, a celebration's worth of big-time mafiosos—all connected by a pair of wandering wine bottles.The third, and most important, takes place on the final transcontinental trip of the improbably-named steam engine the Flying Pussyfoot. Boarding it are a pair of would-be thieves-for-justice named Isaac and Miria, a creepy little kid named Csezlaw Meyer, a tight-knit gang of delinquents led by tattooed crybaby Jacuzzi Splot and his scarred gal friday Nice, a Senator's wife, a spooky gang of black-clad terrorists who swear allegiance to an imprisoned immortal, and a throng of white-clad psychopaths spearheaded by psychopath among psychopaths Ladd Russo. Disembarking are...well, a lot fewer than embark. Particularly given that a blood-red monster known as the Rail Tracer is preying on passengers in the unattended galleys at night.

There are a few other subplots mixed in: a snapshot of Eve Genoard's (the girl searching for her brother) home life that explains how she got where she is today, some cryptic stuff about imprisoned immortal Huey Laforet, and an account of the Advenna Avis, an 18th century ship on which a group of desperate individuals summon a demon—with predictably dire consequences, among others. It all takes place in the fictionalized Prohibition-era America of films like The Untouchables and Bonnie and Clyde, though none of it is presented in chronological order or without an impeccably modern veneer of dark irony, making it in reality a closer cinematic cousin to the modishly fragmented gangster tales of early Tarantino and Guy Ritchie (whose Snatch the opening sequence pays obvious homage to).

Though it takes the temporal trickery and especially the violence of even those films to fevered new heights. It rockets with neck-kinking speed between timelines, resolutely refusing to settle into any pattern, and within each timeline fragments itself even further with overlapping viewpoints and elliptical editing. The show drenches this temporal obfuscation (and nearby characters, walls, upholstery and everything really) in deranged violence so extreme—Ladd at one point literally dances in a tide of gore—that only its darkly funny synchronicity prevents it from being genuinely sickening. The series' knack for creating (and disguising until just the right time) plot confluences that turn the villains' own brutality against them makes the gore

satisfying as often as it is stomach-turning. The series' finale in particular is an orgiastic exercise in audience satiation, a beautifully orchestrated triple dose of bloody schadenfreude that'll have even the most jaded viewers cheering to the rafters.

Fans of the series are of course aware of this. The real question isn't the series' quality but whether we're justified in paying for it again. It's a tricky question. The box, while beautifully appointed with original art by original artist Katsumi Enami, is a fairly flimsy cardboard affair, and the set has no extras. On the other hand it includes (as did the DVDs) the series' three-episode OVA sequel, which provides a well-earned follow-up on the fates of the Flying Pussyfoot's survivors. Plus the series has never looked better. Full HD may be a tad excessive for a series originally aired on TV, but it still shows off Takahiro Kishida's rough-edged, sharp-lined, and unspeakably sexy characters to their best advantage, as well as revealing every ostentatious detail of its anally-rendered replication of the 1930's America of our collective pop-culture imaginations. Takahiro Omori and Brains Base's stubbornly shortcut-free animation also looks great and Makoto Yoshimori's era-appropriate jazz score has never sounded better.

And neither has Funimation's dub, which Aniplex of America has retained for this re-release. The key to the dub's success lies in its often uncanny reproduction of the original cast's colorful (to put it very, very mildly) charm. The show is its characters. Quite literally in some ways; original author Ryohgo Narita allowed them to run the plot rather than vice-versa. Isaac and Miria's unbounded idiocy and enthusiasm aren't just essential to their characters; they're essential to the very existence of the series. Without them, their monkeywrenching ways (oh the things those two can do to a well-planned plot), or any one of their many demented comrades, the series wouldn't be what it is. So capturing them, and the rest of the outlandish cast, is essential. And the dub does, with unerring accuracy and the kind of verve that can't be faked or forced.

The slangy rewrites (obviously more influenced by movie versions of 30s slang than by actual 30s slang) and geographically appropriate (though highly variable) accents are more a bane than a boon, but they can hardly dent the series' steamrolling entertainment value. Like the train that the bulk of it takes place in, Baccano! is an unstoppable engine of death, destruction, and black laughs. Secretly driven by cosmic justice and underwritten by twisted romance of course. If you haven't joined the party yet, this is a perfect chance to get on the train. If you already have, then it's up to you, and your videophilia, whether you want buy a second ticket or not.

Clannad After Story (2011-03-12 21:14)

The school year continues for Tomoya and Nagisa, and with it comes more people for Tomoya to help. First up is Mei, who is still deeply concerned over how much her big brother Youhei's behavior has changed toward her since the fight which resulted in him leaving the soccer team two years earlier. Even shock treatment and a fake girlfriend (of surprising origin!) don't help; only more drastic circumstances will suffice. Next, a dreamy trip down memory lane reveals an incident from Misae's past which connects to her present. Later, Yukine's involvement with gang members opens up an unexpected aspect of her life and hidden sorrow.

Eventually, though, time and the school year progress. Nagisa's shaky health results in her missing graduation and having to repeat again, but Tomoya must move on into society, finding both a job and at least some sense of direction, as most of the rest of the gang goes in their own directions. Nagisa remains a constant source of support, however, and gradually Tomoya comes to realize and appreciate what is truly most important to

him. Where one may falter, two can stand strong.

In the original Clannad game, After Story is the bonus story thread which opens up only after a player has completed all of the individual girl-focused threads. Those familiar with the game (or with games of this type in general) will find the anime version to retain that same structural feel and progression; the first series settled all of the major-character individual stories, so now it is time to look at the stories of minor characters and pursue one major one further. For those not familiar with the game, After Story has the typical structural feel and progression of a second season which follows a major climax at the end of the first season: it piddles around for a while before getting its legs back under it and continuing the main story. Either way, the look and sentiment of the franchise's content remains consistent. If you liked the original, you will almost certainly like episodes 1-12 of the follow-up.

The first half can be divided into two distinct and only slightly overlapping parts: the Helping People part, which spans episodes 1-8, and the Advancing the Storyline part, which spans episodes 9-12 but will clearly continue strong into the second half. The three mini-arcs which make up the former are all stories fairly typical of the first season, ones which mix some occasionally very funny humor with character drama, a healthy dose of sentiment, and in one case another bit of the supernatural. The side story of the girl and the robot alone in the world also sporadically returns during this time. Although these arcs, like most of the first series, give the impression of just serving up juicy little vignettes, only as the story advances through the later episodes does the real reason for their presence become clear: everything up until episode 9 just sets the stage for what happens from that point on.

And that is where the series truly kicks into high gear: when it actually shows how things progress after the central couple finally, definitively, hooks up, revealing that "happily ever after," if it comes, is not going to come right away. Tomoya's transition into the adult world is a sequence of events rarely played out in anime, as normally stories either run up to this point or start right after it. As such, those parts where he is struggling to get established and still manage his relationship with Nagisa have a more personal and real feel to them than any of the manufactured sentiment seen anywhere else in either series. Nagisa waking him up in the morning and cooking meals for him in his new apartment becomes more than just a tired anime cliché: they are her way of showing support for Tomoya's efforts and remaining close to him when they cannot be together as much anymore. During this time, everything that Tomoya has done to try to help others eventually leads him to important realizations about what really matters to him: a sense of family which fights off the loneliness, something which he never got at home. That leads to the long-anticipated (but amazingly low-key in execution) climax at the end of episode 12 – and kudos to Sentai Filmworks for wisely choosing to end this set on that note rather than also including episode 13 (of a possible 25). That is the moment which should be allowed to linger until the second half of the season becomes available.

Kyoto Animation maintains the same artistic quality standards seen throughout the first series: good, but definitely not their best. The girls' summer uniforms, which lack the tan jackets, are not as sharp but not quite generic, either, and the character designs effectively de-age Misae and Yoshino during their flashback scenes. As before, the only real CG is seen in the robot in the "end of the world" sequences.

The soundtrack merely carries over most of its recurring themes from the original series, so its quality here is more symptomatic of very effectively using what it has than impressing with anything new. Lia, who did the OP and ED for Air and the last-episode ending theme for the original series, does both of them here, with the soulful opener "Toki wo Kizamu Uta" being not only quite superior to the more ordinary closer "Torch" but possibly the best opening song of all of the Key/Visual Art's adaptations.

As with the first season, this one has no English dub, but at least the subtitles are free of the typos which plagued the first season and do include an occasional explanatory note where certain jokes do not

translate well. The first letter of longer lines will sometimes run off the screen on some TVs/monitors, however. The only real Extras are clean opener and closer, and Sentai seems to be getting a bit lazy with its trailers; all of them on this volume are just the series openers.

After Story does clean up a couple of lingering details, such as how Yoshino ended up as an electrician after formerly being a rock star and what, exactly, happened between Sunohara and the soccer club. Tomoya's relationship with his father is still a work in progress as this set ends and the "end of the world" story still apparently has more to tell, but Fuko is barely mentioned at all and remains an unresolved thread; presumably this will be dealt with in the second half? On the plus side, the series throws in a few nice jokes and references to other Key/Visual Art's titles for dedicated fans. Overall, it is a title which should thoroughly satisfy fans of the franchise and thoroughly flummox most who never appreciated the first series.

Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion (2011-03-19 21:18)

Lelouch shows off his chess playing prowess as he beats an aristocrat. As insignificant as it may seem, it's his own way of rebelling against the Holy Empire of Britannia, the superpower that has taken over Japan and dominates the world stage. He knows that as a student and living under the protection of a minor family in this realm, he is literally just a spectator as the events unfolding all around him cause untold suffering and oppression. This has all been weighing heavily upon him since he was a small child, particularly because his beloved sister is now debilitated due to the tumultuous events in their lives. So it was that when a mysterious green haired girl named C.C. appears and offers him the power of the king, he takes it without hesitation and the world afterwards was never the same again.

The 2006-2007 anime season was a very busy one. It produced titles like The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya and Death Note, which have since become classics and have generated fans that the world has not seen since the early days of Naruto and Bleach. Anime trends seem to follow spurts in activity like these and sometimes figuring out what's going to be a hit is not always so easy. What is often predictable however is that in between these "anime generation" defining periods, there always follow a spate of often mediocre shows that rehash or try to cash in on the popularity of the fashionable titles, and is often the time when we get the most number of jaded critics writing how the glory days of anime are over. This really just means then that in each "golden age" it becomes tough for any more than one or two titles to reign supreme (think of Evangelion; what other titles got as much attention back then?).

So how is it that we have a third hit in the same time period? The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya came out first in 2006 and this centres around a girl that had god-like powers but whom wasn't aware of them and must be kept in the dark at all cost. Death Note played with the premise of a young man who had awe inspiring powers to alter the destinies of people through a notebook. Code Geass' extraordinary twist is to grant Lelouch the power to have anyone who is trapped by his gaze to do his bidding, no matter what that may be. Three stories that from the surface level all tell a different tale, but dig in to their core and it's all about one person granted powers that are beyond what other story tellers have dared to grant their characters before.

Why these titles all got popular back then is simple; they gave people something more. Perhaps it's a bi-product of the literature at the time wherein books like The Da Vinci Code offered monumental revelations that thoroughly engaged readers. Audiences did not care that they were being overloaded with information and plotlines wove together like some schizophrenic spider's tangle of webs. The best thing about an audience like this - one that ate up just about anything put in front of them - is that they'll continue to just keep

wanting more, so any show that did just that were sure to succeed.

Code Geass offered a lot of intrigue and political satire, and a main character that is rich in contradictions. The tides of battle were always changing and similarly, alliances were as frail as a castle of sand arrayed against a stormy sea. Mix this in with gratuitous amounts of Pizza Hut product placement, nosebleed inducing fanservice, and a line up of mecha that undoubtedly topped up Bandai's coffers in sales of model kits then you'll agree, this show had tonnes to offer. Indeed it's probably the more ambitious and grand of all the titles released in that season, typical of most Sunrise titles. And did I mention the character designs were CLAMP's?

Animation quality was pretty good, though as with any of CLAMP's stylised character designs it may take a bit of getting used to if you've come from other mecha anime like Gundam before. On that note, one other thing that gave Code Geass its wide appeal is its ability to attract female viewers (at least in western circles). The flowing and often effeminate appearance and action of the characters, together with the sometimes poetic words and delivery of Zero's speeches make this almost like Ouran High School Host Club but with robots, lasers and missiles. Rarely will you see a mecha series have this much bright colours.

This has become one of those "must see" titles of the past decade. Hardly an anime fan who has spent a day in an anime convention would claim that they have not heard of Code Geass before. It's part of a generation of shows that have begun treating its viewers as having a bit more intelligence than your typical shounen battle type anime addict and yet maintains many of the plot devices that attracted us to anime in the first place. If I was going to make a complaint about this series it would be that keeping all of this mix of ingredients from boiling over eventually does become a strain, but for at least this collection everything is run very tightly and before you even notice anything going amiss you'll already be too deep into it to care.

Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B
Overall (sub) : B
Story : A
Animation : A
Art : A-
Music : A

\+ Totally intriguing and fast paced storyline that will have you hooked from the first episode.
− Product placement!

Top 32 (2011-03-20 23:17)

1. Code Geass Lelouch of the Rebellion
2. Cowboy Bebop
3. Monster
4. Code Geass Lelouch of the Rebellion R2
5. Full Metal Alchemist
6. Mushi-Shi
7. Neon Genesis Evangelion
8. Death Note
9. Samurai Champloo

10. Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex
11. Welcome to the NHK
12. Kino's Journey
13. Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex 2nd Gig
14. Haibane Renmei
15. Moribito Guardian of the Sacred Spirit
16. Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya
17. Nana
18. Spirited Away
19. Clannad After Story
20. Gungrave
21. Serial Experiments Lain
22. Gankutsuo The Count of Monte Cristo
23. Vision of Escaflowne
24. Eureka Seven
25. Full Metal Panic! The Second Raid
26. The Twelve Kingdoms
27. Wolf's Rain
28. Last Exile
29. Neon Genesis Evangelion
30. Revolutionary Girl Utena
31. Castle in the Sky
32. Clannad

1.3 April

Cowboy Bebop review (2011-04-01 21:41)

In the year 2071 mankind has spread to the stars.....thanks to the invention of Hyper-Space Gates the majority of the solar system has been colonized in less than a century. But as in the American Old West, law and authority cannot keep up with the rapid expansion of the frontier. Crime is rampant, and the powers that be must rely on bounty hunters more so than the organized police force. And through these bounty hunters another aspect of the Old West is reborn: the Cowboy.

Reformed gangster Spike Spiegal and ex-cop Jet Black are two down-on-their luck cowboys trying to earn a living in this uncertain future. Despite the two men's experience in dealing with the criminal element, they never seem to quite catch their bounty. You'd think they might get some help from the data dog Ein, gambling queen Faye Valentine, or the hacker-prodigy Ed....but more often than not this motley crew is left empty-handed. In their ship, the Bebop, they cruise the solar system fighting crime, running from their pasts, and trying to find a decent meal.

Since premiering in 1998, Cowboy Bebop has quickly become one of the most popular and respected anime titles in history. Blending futuristic sci-fi with an urban retro-1970s feel, Bebop is a unique television show which skillfully transcends all kinds of genres. Episodes vary drastically in tone, from cartoonish farce to dramatic tragedy and everything in between. It's all held together by some of the most endearing characters to ever grace an anime, along with movie-quality animation, sophisticated writing, and an incredible pop

score by the great Yoko Kanno. One of Bebop's commercial bumpers proclaims it, a bit pretentiously, "the work which will become a new genre in itself". It's right: Cowboy Bebop is unlike anything you've ever seen before. "The Perfect Sessions" collects all 26 episodes of this landmark anime series, along with a CD of some of the excellent music that puts the "Bebop" in Cowboy Bebop.

Cowboy Bebop is a series that fairly oozes style, which is a very hard-to-define element. There's just something undeniably cool about it. Perhaps it's the exotic-yet-familiar vision of a future in which space-age technology coexists with more everyday items like ceiling fans and automobiles (in this aspect, Cowboy Bebop is reminiscent of the old Dirty Pair television series). It could be the back-ally jazz compositions that punctuate the action, or the main character Spike's laid-back, cavalier attitude towards life. But whatever it is, Cowboy Bebop has it in doses. You'll be hard pressed to find an anime with more panache.

The characters are so convincingly portrayed that the show could have been successful without any of the afore-mentioned style. Spike's character in particular runs the gamut from goofy to blasé' to teeth-gnashing tough; he is one of most three-dimensional anime leads in recent memory. Jet may seem like a no-nonsense heavy but he's actually a concerned father-figure for the rest of the crew, and Faye's sultry tough-girl act covers up a very insecure individual. Only the 13-year-old female hacker Ed is given a one-sided persona, but her oddball mirth is presented so vividly it's easy to accept her as a genuine personality as well. These strong characterizations help carry the series through some predictable storylines that might otherwise be pretty dull.

The series is episodic in nature, each episode (or "session") tells a self-contained story that often has no bearing on the others. Many of the plots are taken straight from the pages of old pulp-fiction novels or classic American cop shows. The show relies on it's unique interpretation of these familiar cliché's to give it a fresh spin. There is very little "point" to the series than to entertain it's audience, which it consistently does.

One of the few recurring themes of Cowboy Bebop is that your past has a way of catching up with you. Spike has left his life of crime, but still relentlessly seeks his old mob flame Julia. Instead he usually winds up running into Vicious, his former superior in the Red Dragon Mafia who wants him dead for leaving the syndicate.....or is it because of Julia? Jet wants nothing at all to do with his own past, which only holds painful memories of a lost love and a lost left arm, yet events surrounding his old misfortunes come back to haunt him. Faye, conversely, is an amnesiac who his actively seeking the answers to her missing past. When she finally regains her memory, the truth turns out to be very bittersweet. Even carefree Ed is faced with her troubled past when her neglectful father reappears late in the series. These serious moments are at odds with the gritty-yet-lighthearted tone found in the majority of the series, and yet there is no feeling of inconsistency in the show's varying attitudes. Cowboy Bebop makes no attempt to hide it is inspired by the musical format of the Blues (The show's closing theme is "The Real Folk Blues"), and most good Blues melodies manage to be jazzy while at the same time a little somber. Cowboy Bebop is, in a way, a physical manifestation of the Blues.

The usual J-pop soundtrack would not suit such a project well, and the Bebop staff rightly sought an American jazz sound to accompany their work. Yoko Kanno had proven her talent by creating memorable orchestral scores for anime like Macross Plus and Escaflowne, and with Cowboy Bebop she shows a remarkable musical versatility. Her instrumental pieces for Bebop outrank many a Hollywood film's, and the many songs (almost all in English) that are peppered throughout the series could certainly be top-40 hits on American radio, particularly "Call Me Call Me" and "Want it all Back". Kanno's music is vital to achieving the eclectic mood Bebop strives for, and oftentimes the music takes precedence over the action or the characters.

The amazing musical score complements a high quality of animation seldom seen on television. Character

movements are much fuller than that of a standard TV anime. Character Designer Toshihiro Kawamoto, who previously had worked on the Gundam series 08th MS Team, has a very appealing yet simple style that is easier to animate than the more complex designs found in other anime. The animation of the various vehicles featured in Bebop is also of very high merit, and is made more impressive by the fact that much of it was done traditionally, without the aid of computers. The CG that is present in Bebop blends very well for a series done in 1998. Though not as seamless as the merger of old and new techniques in recent productions like Vampire Hunter D or even the Cowboy Bebop movie, it is a far sight better than earlier attempts at mixing computer and hand animation, as in Blue Submarine #6.

Much has been made of Cowboy Bebop's English dub, and rightly so. All too often the inclination in voice-over work is to caricature the voice, make it "cartoonish" and unnatural. There are frequently times where this is of course the appropriate method, but many anime tell sophisticated stories that require a more realistic approach. Several serious anime have been belittled by their English dubs that feature hammy, over-the-top voice acting. Cowboy Bebop is to be commended for boasting a flawless English cast which plays it straight and low-down. Even the cartoony Ed, whom the directors easily could have given an equally cartoony voice, sounds like a sincere 13-year-old girl...albeit a very oddball one. The English cast is so convincing, in fact, they actually one-up the Japanese originals. Wendee Lee in particular is to be commended for besting the great Megumi Hayashibara as Faye.

"The Perfect Sessions" collects all 6 DVD volumes of Bebop in a snazzy box that's as cool as the show inside. The main cast is featured in a gold-tone portrait on the front, and a little picture of Ein graces the back corner. Inside is a sampling of Bebop tunes on CD. It showcases some of the best tracks from the first part of the series but regrettably leaves out some great compositions from the latter episodes, such as the aforementioned "Call Me" and "Blue".

I've never met an anime fan who didn't like Cowboy Bebop, and I know many non-anime fans who admire it as well. Like the best works of film, it has a universal appeal that transcends cultures and personal tastes. It is an anime that will be remembered long after many others have been forgotten.

Overall (dub) : A+
Overall (sub) : A
Story : B-
Animation : A+
Art : A
Music : A+

\+ simply one of the greatest anime titles ever, showcasing brilliant characterization, animation, music, and above all entertainment
− storylines are nothing new, music CD included in Box set leaves out some of the best tracks

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Darker than Black (2011-04-03 21:44)

Ten years ago, an impenetrable field known as "Hell's Gate" appeared in Tokyo, and in its wake people across the world began to manifest powerful psychic abilities. Called "Contractors," each has his or her own unique power, but must pay a cost for its use which varies from self-mutilation to excessive eating to obsessive-compulsive behavior. Their existence kept secret from the general public, control of contractors is highly-prized by various intelligence organizations and other private interests, though the contractors themselves are sometimes treated as less than human. Hei, an especially powerful contractor known to

authorities only by the code designation BK201, accomplishes varied missions for a mysterious syndicate, which include getting information from escaped and retired researchers and rescuing a captured notorious contractor who seems to have lost her powers. Assisting him is the blind "doll" Yin and Mao, a talking cat.

For as long as stories about super-powered individuals have existed in human lore, they have always had some sort of contrivance to explain the existence of powers beyond the normal physical realm, whether it be science, technology, magic, spiritual, genetics, aliens, or some combination of those factors. The biggest problem with the first volume of Darker than BLACK is that its take on the origin of its super-human abilities is more nonsensical than most. It seems like the creators had some cool ideas for super-powered individuals and the kind of situations they could get into but could not come up with an adequate justification for how these individuals had powers, so they just forced things together to create some nearly incomprehensible mumbo-jumbo about a wall mysteriously appearing and a fake sky replacing the real one, a sky whose fake stars apparently flare when the contractor (yes, the designation is left uncapitalized in the subtitles, though it is capitalized in the Extras) synchronized to that star uses his powers. Granted, this could possibly make more sense as the series goes on, but through the first five episodes at least it's best to just go with the flow and let the stories run their courses.

The structuring of the powers also leaves a lot to be desired. Having some kind of cost or penalty associated with power use has its roots in ancient mysticism from across the world, but the peculiarities of the "costs" in this case are, in some cases, downright dumb. Having to lay stones out in a square grid whenever you use your powers, smoke cigarettes, or dog-ear all of the pages in a book? Please! At least the guy who had to break one of his own fingers every time he used his powers had a real (and credible!) cost. Let's not even get started on the lameness of terms like "contractor," "moratorium," and "forfeiter" for individuals at various stages of power use/development.

Set aside that nonsense, though, and the first volume actually assembles a pair of sharp two-episode story arcs and an intriguing beginning to the third arc. Both the initial arc about the researcher on the lam and the second arc about the emerging contractor offer surprisingly poignant and human stories as a foundation for the super-powered mayhem, while the last episode opens up a whole posse of new questions and revelations, including why a woman once regarded as the most dangerous and feared of all contractors looks so positively morose. Linking the stories together into a vaguely overarching plot is Misaki Kirihara's quest for the mysterious BK201. And it's hard to ignore any series which figures out a way to include a talking cat in the cast.

Amongst the rest of its cast, Hei is a hard one to figure out as a central character, as how much of how he behaves is subterfuge for his current assignment, and how much is real, is unclear so far. He does seem to have a heart, yet under cover of his mask he also does some heartless things, too. Yin, the blue-haired girl who seems to be his partner, only ever serves as a tool, getting so little character development that these episodes do not even make it clear that she's supposedly blind. Huang, who seems to be Hei's boss/job provider, gives off a typical mobster vibe, and most other recurring cast members are also fairly typical for their roles. The featured guest stars in each arc make more of an impression, especially Chiaki (the female researcher) and Yuka (the teenager).

The impression given off by the look of this original BONES production suggests that this is what Speed Grapher might have looked like had it been given a more refined look and more talented staff. It excels in its detailed background art and in computerized vehicle animation that looks more natural and integrated than other recent attempts, while its character designs and animation sometimes have a roughness to them

not typical of most other BONES productions, as well as some character designs that borrow heavily from other BONES series, especially Kurau: Phantom Memory. Quality control, which has often been an issue for BONES, remains consistent through this span, however.

Yoko Kanno stands behind the musical score for this one, and turns in another sterling effort. The scenes hop with life when they need to thanks to her score, which predominately uses rock-infused themes but proves well capable of handling softer moments with gentle piano numbers. It may not be one of her most distinctive efforts, but the series is certainly better for it. The heavy opener "Howling" by abingdon boys school starkly contrasts with the much more melodic, adult contemporary-styled closer "Tsukiakari" by Rie Fu, providing a symbolic representation of both the heavier and softer sides of the content.

The Japanese cast does an unusually good job of matching voices to lip flaps and turns in more subtle, understated performances than is typical for Japanese voice acting. The English dub stays stride for stride, similarly keeping its actors restrained without losing any of the feeling of the original performances. As per the norm, Funimation's script meddles quite a bit with the original script, but not as much so as is often seen in Funimation productions.

Amongst the Extras included on this volume are textless opener and closer and a "production artwork" file which is actually split between character bios and background production art. Also included is a commentary track for episode 2 done by Colleen "Chiaki" Clinkenbeard and Jason "Hei" Liebrecht. (The most interesting revelation? Rose Anderson from Solty Rei is the character she's voiced that Ms. Clinkenbeard most identifies with.)

Though built on a shaky foundation and with suspect structure, the first volume of Darker than BLACK still finds enough substance in its initial story arcs, and enough support from its musical score and voice acting, to weather its first storms.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : B+
Animation : B+
Art : B+
Music : A-

\+ Solid storytelling in individual story arcs, effective musical score.
− Nonsensical explanation/structure for super-powers, weak character development in some cases.

Death Note review (2011-04-05 21:46)

Bored with his deteriorating world and the laconic way of his fellows, shinigami Ryuuk drops his Death Note on Earth and watches to see if it stirs up anything interesting. His plan succeeds beyond his wildest expectations when the Death Note is found by brilliant high school senior Light Yagami, who is also bored with a world he considers rotten. Although initially he regards the book as a prank, Light soon discovers, through experimentation, that the book's claim is true: picture a person in your mind as you write the person's name in the Death Note, and that person dies 40 seconds later of of a heart attack (although a different time frame and manner of death can be specified). Armed with that power, Light sets out on a quest he sees as noble: make the world a better place by eliminating all its criminals using the Death Note.

Soon cast as the mysterious "Kira" (a Japanese pronunciation of the English "killer") in the media and on the Internet, some take exception to his playing god, most notably the police and the enigmatic master detective L, who resolves to do everything in his power to stop Kira. Light counters by doing everything in his power to prevent people from identifying or interfering with him, even if that means getting rid of people investigating him.

Review:

Is Death Note the best new anime series to be released in America during 2007? That may be debatable, but its status amongst the year's elite titles is not. The rare blend of originality, intelligence, and quality visuals it exhibits allows it to take an interesting horror-story concept, bend it over backwards, and turn it into a good-looking thriller whose intensity matches that of any dedicated action series despite its total lack of true action scenes. It may get off to a humdrum start, but the closing moments of episode 1, where Light declares to Ryuk that he intends to become the god of the new world he is trying to shape, is likely to grab anyone's attention, and the formal establishment of the duel of wits between Light and L by the end of episode 2 should hook most viewers not already firmly committed. It also stands as a dramatic counterpoint to all the gushy moe content, generic harem romantic comedies, and typical coming-of-age shonen action stories out there.

The commendable merits of the first volume are many, but the pivotal one is the decision by original creators Tsugami Ooba and Takeshi Obata to stand convention on its head by switching the traditional profiles of the protagonist and antagonist. In Light we see a classic diabolical genius, a brilliant young man who gets so wrapped up in his zealotry and self-importance that he decides he is above morality, thus failing to accept that he is turning to the Dark Side. He may be the primary character but he is also the story's true villain, an approach very rarely used in anime titles. That alone might make him fascinating to watch, but the extreme cleverness and thoroughness with which he quickly learns to exploit the Death Note to the fullest and protect his true identity also shows an impressive and involving display of intelligence, too, something not often seen in the main protagonist of anime series. (Most often the most intelligent characters are in the supporting cast.)

Every great hero or villain must have an equally-skilled counterpart to play off of, and Light/Kira soon finds that in the mysterious L, whose own intelligence and deductive ability Light quickly comes to respect. L's existence does require a sizable contrivance and uncommonly incompetent performance by the police detectives on the case, and that does stand as the series' biggest flaw to date, but the intellectual duel his presence sets up with Light makes those considerations excusable. The efforts of the two try to second-guess and deceive or manipulate each other, while also protecting themselves from discovery by the other, generate considerable and compelling tension; seldom have mental duels been so much fun to watch. Next to them, Ryuk serves just as colorful flavor and a sounding board to give Light an excuse to explain what he's doing.

Death Note impresses no less with a bold visual look courtesy of MADHOUSE, one which eschews most traditional anime stylings in favor of realistic character designs and a dark (but not exactly gloomy) color scheme. Ryuk looks like an evil, twisted clown, but somehow that seems fitting, and all of the character renditions have a depth, texture, and degree of refinement and quality control on par with the top series production efforts to date. Detailed background art and flawless foreground/background integration also contribute to this exceptional effort, as does the timing, framing, and selection of scenes; how many other series can get so much out of meaningful glares, faint turns of expression, or dramatic but not exaggerated flourishes? Smooth, dynamic animation which uses few shortcuts and rarely skimps on detail only further

supports the effect. Also worthy of mention is the artistry of the opener, with its meaningful Christian artistic allusions and suggestion that perhaps the prominent presence of apples in the series has a deeper symbolism.

A musical score which mixes electronica pieces and orchestral numbers flavored with dramatic vocal chants also does its part, punctuating key moments with just enough emphasis to hype the scene up without (usually) going over-the-top. The opening theme "The World" by Nightmare gives the series an appropriate rocker opener, and the closer "Aluminia" also fits.

Favoring the English or Japanese dub will largely come down to a matter of personal taste on certain vocal styles, but anyone used to English dubs should find this effort by Ocean Productions to be quite satisfying in general and a distinct improvement when it comes to pronouncing English language names like "Light" and "Death Note" right. Some may argue about whether or not he captures all of the nuances of the original performance, but anime veteran Brad Swaile generally has Light's attitudes down right, while Alessandro Juliani, who may be better-known to American sci fi fans as CIC tactical officer Lt. Felix Gaeta on the recent incarnation of Battlestar Galactica, captures the eccentric brilliance of L. Brian Drummond, meanwhile, gives a suiting gravel-voiced interpretation to Ryuk. None of the lesser roles shine, but none can be considered weak, either. The English script varies little, even retaining the term "shinigami."

The typical Extras include clean opener and closer, production art, and "Shonen Jump Home Video" (i.e. trailers strung together). An included "Behind the Scenes featurette" focuses on English ADR director Karl Willems and Mr. Swaile, whom the featurette reveals could have almost been cast for the role of Light as much for how he vaguely resembles Light as because of his voice. Mr. Willems follows this up with a solo audio commentary for episode one, which stays flawlessly on the subject of the episode material but does not sound as relaxed and comfortable as it should; having one of the voice actors or other production personnel to interact with probably would have helped. A Deluxe Edition which includes a Ryuk figurine is also available, as is a bundling with the first Death Note manga volume.

If you originally got into anime because of how excitingly different it was from the animation you were used to seeing, this is the kind of title that can reaffirm your dedication to your hobby. With the ongoing Adult Swim TV broadcasts and the first DVD volumes now available in North America, everyone should at least give the first few episodes a try and see what the fuss is all about. It may have slight flaws, but any series which assembles all of the various production aspects as well as the first few episodes of this one does deserves a chance.

Overall (dub) : A
Overall (sub) : A
Story : A
Animation : A-
Art : A
Music : A-

+ Exceptional concept, plotting, visuals, and musical support; intelligent, clever, and intense.
− L's existence is too dependent on improbable contrivances.

L has placed Light's life under a microscope, and while Light ultimately prevails, the eccentric sleuth still smells something awry. So much so, that he joins the same college and personally introduces himself. The intellectual sparring between the two suddenly takes on a much more personal tone, but just when it seems that something has to give, someone with powers similar to Kira's besieges a television station. L, faced with two Kiras, enlists Light's help and Light agrees, hoping to allay suspicions. However, his

search for the new Kira turns serious when she—she's a somewhat bubble-headed girl his own age—starts unintentionally feeding L everything he needs to know to deduce where Kira's godlike powers truly stem from.

Review:

There comes a time in the career of any reviewer when they must grit their teeth, clutch their integrity to their chests like a magic charm, and go forth to buck the opinions of nearly everyone they've met, talked to, or read. I thought that that time had come when I felt compelled to give the well-loved SuperGALS! a thorough horse-whipping. However the trepidation I felt then was nothing compared to what I felt when, after being assigned to review this volume, I caught up with the series by renting the second volume and realized to my horror that I hate this series. It wasn't boredom, pain, irritation, or even a matter of flaws versus merits. It was pure unadulterated loathing.

It's a difficult reaction to puzzle out and one that usually indicates that a series is actually quite good—there has to be something to a show that can elicit a reaction that strong. And indeed Death Note is strong on all fronts. Its art is beautiful—rich, dark, and dripping with cold alienation. Its movements are clean, smooth and startlingly devoid of budgetary deficiencies. Its soundtrack is bursting with baroque doom, and it is acted to cruel, chilling perfection in both languages (save for a certain weakness in the English supporting cast). It's written with an intelligence and ruthlessness that shames the vast majority of its Shonen Jump brethren. It builds suspense with masterful skill, seizing the attention at the beginning of each episode, never letting go until there are simply no more episodes available to watch. It is continually changing, always shifting narrative focus or introducing some awful new quirk into Light's plans. There is nothing repetitive or predictable; every new turn is a surprise, every event the introduction of a new point of interest. Just when you think Light and L's intellectual battle is running in circles, L personally confronts Light, completely retrofitting their relationship.

So why?

It would be easy to point out narrative flaws. Light is unsympathetic and no other character is given enough of a focus to compensate for it. The intricate rules regulating the use of the Death Note smack of American superhero silliness (why does Kryponite hurt Superman? Just because. Why does Light need a name and a face to kill someone with the Death Note? Ditto). While Light's plots are certainly clever, he also makes fundamental mistakes that throw serious doubt on his vaunted genius. What kind of genius thinks that evil is so simple and rare a phenomena that it can be cured by killing a few evildoers in a world with six billion other potential evildoers? What kind of genius can't understand that crime is a symptom of social ills, not the cause? L makes similarly stupid mistakes. If he knows that Kira can control people before he kills them, why can't he figure out that Kira can make them commit suicide? However, flaw-listing isn't just easy, it's also cheap. And even worse, meaningless. Death Note's flaws are easily trumped by its merits; indeed they're insignificant in comparison.

No, what leaves a septic taste in the mouth—and make no mistake, Death Note will leave a septic taste in some mouths—is something far more fundamental. Something that goes beyond all entertainment value, that supersedes emotions of any kind, makes cleverness and intelligence pale, towers over tension, and overshadows invention: It's morally repellent.

You could say that we're not supposed to agree with Light's sickening course of action or sympathize with the nasty little psycho, and in reply one could counter by saying that placing him in the position

of main character forces us to sympathize with him and root for his success no matter how vile he is. But again that misses the point. Light's actions aren't where the aftertaste comes from. In part it springs from the series' often thoughtless treatment of issues of profound moral complexity. As when it forces audiences to consider grey shades of morality and yet builds its questions on a black and white division of the world into "criminals" and "innocents." Or when it constructs fanciful mind games around the Death Note without even stopping to consider the implications of its ability to remove free will. In part it comes from the callow pop nihilism of making a psychotic villain the hero. But the real filth that sticks like psychological monkey dung to fans of humanistic entertainment is the series' populating of the world with mechanical, soulless masses of victims searching, en masse, for a higher power to solve all of their problems. Other than Light and L, there are no "real" people in the world, people who have lives, ambitions, and wills of their own. It's a streak of solipsism so extreme that the series sometimes borders on a masturbatory fantasy for every teenager who ever blithely came to the conclusion that the world was evil just because they felt disenfranchised.

Perhaps Death Note is merely biding its time, allowing Light to pose and gloat over his killing spree until it pulls off some new twist that deals with the icky implications about free will, that proves that it's Light rather than the writers themselves who is looking at the world with uncritical eyes clouded by nauseating misanthropy, and that gives some indication that humanity at large has real humans in it besides L and Light. It could happen. In fact, this volume itself makes some progress—the bravery and initiative shown by police and citizens alike in face of the second Kira is a step in the right direction—but until it's willing to treat characters like people instead of marionettes playing parts in some high-concept experiment, it will always be inferior to its similarly sadistic but infinitely more humanistic cousins like Hell Girl.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : C
Overall (sub) : C
Story : B
Animation : A-
Art : A-
Music : A-

+ Dramatic shifts in the series' dynamic; Light doesn't kill any innocent people this time; has the power to draw you in and not let go.
− Leaves you feeling like you took a manure bath.

L and the police have kept Light and Misa in confinement for fifty days, but Kira has not stopped killing, and they have not confessed. They pass a test devised by L that requires Light's father to put his own life on the line and are released. Even so, L does not trust them and places them under twenty-four hour surveillance. Light, he keeps handcuffed to him at all times. Though they have lost the support of law enforcement, the investigative team led by L is soon able to link Kira to the Yotsuba Group. Matsuda, driven by a bout of foolish initiative, sneaks into Yotsuba's Headquarters and discovers a secret cabal of businessmen who appear to be controlling the Kira murders. Light then gets in contact with one of their number in order to convince him to turn Kira in.

Review:

The problem with adaptations is that they tend to reproduce the flaws of their source material, and the Death Note anime is no exception. Like many popular series, the manga continued for far too long, and what could have been one of the greatest plots in Weekly Shounen Jump's venerable history became a

flawed, inelegant cultural product (mis)shaped by commercial imperatives. Viz Media's fifth Death Note DVD, which includes episodes 17-20, unfortunately corresponds to the weakest of the manga's subplots.

At its base, the series is a straightforward tale of good versus evil. L is the good guy; Light is the bad guy. If this were an ordinary, cookie-cutter iteration of that sort of plot, the story would be told from L's perspective. But what makes Death Note so interesting is that it is told from the villain's—Light's—perspective instead, and it is his character that is thoroughly developed, nuanced, and fleshed-out. L, by comparison, is pretty one-dimensional. It's kind of like the original Star Wars trilogy told from the Emperor's perspective, or the Harry Potter series told from Voldemort's. Even so, any astute viewer knows that good always triumphs over evil in the end (the Japanese taste for shades of moral gray aside), which naturally means that Light is doomed.

Up until this volume, Light's descent into the Abyss was a well-paced, finely-crafted piece of narration. But now, Light has given up the Death Note and forgotten his Kira "calling," and the plot as it should have been has screeched to an awkward halt. Of course, the point of the Yotsuba &! Group subplot is to forestall the aforementioned inevitable for as long as possible (the conclusion of a moneymaking series), and the obvious foot-dragging quickly wears on one's patience. And sure enough, two of the episodes here focus primarily upon the development of supporting characters Aizawa and Matsuda, which, though interesting, is not strictly necessary. It would not have been missed had it not been included in the first place. The Yotsuba &! executives likewise exist primarily as filler material, and their personalities are hardly developed at all. Character-wise, the most enjoyable moments involve the interaction between Light and L, and watching the two rivals beat each other up while handcuffed provides some vaguely amusing comic relief (not to mention a healthy helping of rich fodder for yaoi fangirls).

Without a doubt, however, the high point of the anime is its distinctive aesthetic. Though the quality of the animation per se is about average for a TV series, MADHOUSE (Ninja Scroll; X) does the gothic fantasy/horror look better than pretty much anybody, and they were the perfect studio to bring Death Note to life. Character designs are invariably pitch-perfect, and the palette is gloomy yet decadently saturated. The anime's two opening sequences, both of which appear on this DVD, are deliciously disturbing—and well worth watching just by themselves on the basis of artistic merit.

Both the Japanese and English language voice casts are convincing, albeit in their own unique ways. Most viewers will probably find that they prefer one over the other. The latter does not seem to have been chosen specifically to copy the former's execution, and interestingly, with the notable exception of the brilliant Kappei Yamaguchi as L, the English voice actors average significantly longer resumes. The two most important the extras on the DVD, a behind the scenes documentary and a commentary track for episode seventeen, spotlight them…though having Death Note interpreted by people who are not especially close to the anime in its original Japanese production context seems of dubious value. (Other DVD bonuses include production art and trailers.) The dark, angry sound of the soundtrack is likewise appropriate, though the head-banging, punk sound of the opening and ending themes will undoubtedly sound like undifferentiated noise to many.

Anyway, Death Note continues to be a good series—arguably one of the strongest to have appeared at the beginning of the 21st century—even if it does start to go rapidly downhill from here and never quite lives up to the promise of early episodes.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B
Overall (sub) : B
Story : B-

Animation : B+
Art : A
Music : C+

+ Plenty of creative ambition, not to mention style to burn.
− The highest concentration of weak episodes to be found anywhere in the series' run.

NOTE: This review strongly alludes to a major spoiler for a key event within this span of episodes.

Higuchi is dead, but the killings continue, leaving L perplexed about what is happening. He has little more time to figure it out, however, for thanks to Kira's machinations, his fate has been sealed. In the wake of his passing Light takes over as L to pretend to continue the investigation, while two new figures arise as aspiring replacements: the temperamental Mello and the brilliant but blandly odd Near. Several years later, events force the Death Note the task force possesses out of their hands, and cause the death of a task force member, but time has also strengthened Kira's influence on the world. Another Shinigami eventually comes looking for his absent Death Note, while at the same time the dangerous competition to see who between Near and Mello will catch Kira first heats up.

Review:

Death Note started out as an immensely popular and highly-regarded series, but as often happens with series that achieve such a great degree of success, some elements of anime fandom have gradually turned on the series over time. In some cases this is a knee-jerk response to the popularity of the show from the minority which disliked it, while in others the phenomenon represents flaws in the series gradually starting to show as the initial ardor towards the series cools off. This series is partly an example of both. Some fans have definitely become disgusted with the high degree of overly dramatized sensationalism that others love about the series (though in truth Death Note cannot hold a candle to Code Geass on that point), and this pair of volumes shows the series' biggest flaw in all its ignominy. That flaw has a name:

Near.

In fairness, Near is hardly the entirety of the problem here, but he sits at the core of what is wrong with the last third of the series. After establishing the initial presence of the Death Note, the series steadfastly built itself around the conflict and mind games between Light/Kira and L, and when that crucial conflict was in play the series shined. When it wasn't – as was the case during the Yostuba Group arc – the series tanked. L's final episode, despite a blatant and overplayed allusion to the Garden of Gethsemane from Jesus's story, briefly returns the series to its glory before drifting through a mostly recap episode and then time-jumping five years forward, where the series' downfall begins.

The downfall is not immediate, and at first it looks like the series might hold its own by continuing with its trademark exaggerated melodrama. As time passes, though, what the producers have done becomes progressively clearer: they have taken what made L into L and split part of it off into Mello (who gets the occasional emotional side and food fetish), while Near became the other part (the purely analytical side). In the process they broke one great character down into two decidedly mediocre descendants, and in this case the two halves most definitely do not equal the whole. Near may quickly prove quite capable as a foe, but his opposition to Kira lacks the edge and tension that L brought to the conflict. His presence feels too much like an attempt to provide a surrogate for L because the writers could not come up with another worthy opponent, and that can leave a sour taste in the mouth.

At about the same time the caliber of the series' dramatic flair starts to go downhill. A certain amount of exaggerated drama is perfectly acceptable as long as it is handled well, as it is in episode 25 and in the earliest stages of the series, but around the beginning of volume 8 (episode 29) the series starts overdosing on it. Bringing a helpless American President into the picture only exacerbates the problem as it rips up the already-shaky underlying premise of the series: that no one but L or his replacement could track Kira down. (The oft-stated complaint that people would not idolize Kira the way he is in the series carries little weight, especially if one looks on Kira as a cult figure.)

The series does have its good points through this run, however. Sidoh's presence provides a bit of levity in a series that takes itself much too seriously most of the time, Light's manipulation of Rem despite his knowledge of being manipulated is sadistically clever, the handling of Soichiro brings a proper resolution to his story, and Light being forced back on guard by renewed internal suspicions renews a tension that should never have been allowed to pass. Getting to see Light's sister Sayu all grown up is an added bonus, as is the interesting use of an insert song in episode 25. These episodes also maintain the high level of distinctive artistic quality that has been nearly as much of a watermark for the series as its title notebook, including several especially nice choices of shots and visual effects. The signature grandiose sound of the series also continues, hitting some high peaks in places while sounding overblown and overwrought in others. Hard-core metal opener "What's Up People?!" continues through these episodes, as does second closer "Zetsubou Billy," both by Maximum The Hormone.

Whatever flaws may be found elsewhere in the content, the English dub is not part of them. The core cast does an excellent job of infusing their respective characters with a proper tone that does not stray much from the Japanese originals, and the English script stays remarkably tight. Regrettably the most distinguished performance – that of actor Alessandro Juliani (Lt. Felix Gaeta on the new Battlestar Galactica) as L – lasts for only two episodes before bowing out with the character, but none of the performances are bad, and Samuel Vincent's whiny interpretation of Sidoh is a hoot. While this dub may not quite make the cut as one of the elite, it should be plenty good enough for anyone who normally at least tolerates dubs.

Extras on both volumes includes additional installments of the "Behind the Scenes" pieces seen in previous volumes, limited sets of production art, and an English audio commentary for one of the episodes which involves ADR director Karl Willems with a rotating set of English voice actors. In volume 7 Alessandro and Colleen "Rem" Wheeler talk about episode 25, while on volume 8 Cathy "Near" Weseluck (probably most famous to American fans as the voice of C-ko) joins Mr. Willems for a discussion of 30. Neither impresses.

In retrospect, perhaps the most interesting thing about episodes 25-32 is the way they unobtrusively foreshadow later events. (For instance, if you have already seen the end of the series, listen carefully to what Matsuda says through this run.) Although this run initially marks a step out of the Dark Age into which the series had fallen, the reprieve proves only brief. These volumes may have some strong content, but on the whole they stray far from the series at its best.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B
Overall (sub) : B
Story : B
Animation : A-
Art : A-
Music : B+

+ Episode 25, artistry, English dub.
− Exaggerated dramatic flair becomes overblown at times, Near.

Eureka Seven (2011-04-08 21:54)

14-year-old Renton Thurston, son of a deceased war hero, lives what he considers a boring life with his mechanic grandfather in a boring town. The only thing which gives his life meaning is "lifting/reffing" on Trapar waves (i.e. aerial boarding) and dreaming of joining the crew of the renegade Gekkostate and its leader, the legendary lifter Holland. Just such an opportunity literally falls into his lap when a special LFO (a transforming mecha that "lifts") called Nirvash, a member of Gekkostate, crashes into his grandfather's shop. Thanks in part to his use of his father's Amita Drive to power up the Nirvash in a crucial fight, Renton is invited to join Gekkostate on board their mother ship Gekko, where he quickly discovers that the behind-the-scenes life of Gekkostate is hardly so glamorous or interesting as he imagined. But one thing makes it all worthwhile for him: the presence of Eureka, the mysterious and rather cute girl who pilots Nirvash.

Review:

Although its structure is fairly ordinary for a shonen mecha series, Eureka 7 does serve up one of the oddest variations on the genre: these mecha not only transform but go airboarding, too! This is, of course, an utterly preposterous notion which vacates any degree of common sense (even moreso than normal for mecha series) in favor of tapping into the "cool" factor of extreme sports, in much the same way that Vin Diesel's XXX movie tried to do a couple of years ago. But sometimes these crazy gimmicks actually do work, and this is one of those times.

The reason why the series works, at least in its early stages, is because it knows how to abuse its gimmick to deliver several rip-roaring action scenes. Rather than the fisticuffs, super-weapon, or guns-blazing approach most commonly seen in mecha battles, these are dynamic action sequences which emphasize mobility, graceful aerial maneuvering, and slashing or smashing enemy mecha in devastating high-speed passes when they must be fought directly. Sure, the enemy depends heavily on missile fire, but its use feels boorish compared to the elegance of the Gekkostate mecha.

The other big early selling point is Eureka, who isn't the main character even though her name's in the title. While Renton is a pretty normal male lead for a series like this, Eureka quickly shows that she's more than just the Rei Ayanami clone she might initially appear to be. In many ways she breaks the mold for teenage female anime leading ladies: she's calm, sensible, and soft-spoken but not necessarily shy, seems innocent in some respects but is also far more mature than her youthful appearance suggests, and is quite capable of showing joy, sadness, or earnestness without resorting to the exaggerated expressions and reactions so common in anime. Studio BONES' smartest move with Eureka was not giving her much of a figure, though. The well-endowed hottie/jailbait female mecha pilot has been done to death, and there are enough other female characters in the series with significant cleavage, so not giving her any just contributes to her uniqueness. She also seems to have some odd abilities and circumstances, although these are not explored much in the first five episodes.

Supporting Renton and Eureka is a quirky cast primarily composed of Gekkostate members, of which only Holland and Talho, his sexy girlfriend and main Gekko pilot, have been well-established so far.

One can almost see the channeling of Cowboy Bebop going on here as the lot of them are portrayed as a bunch of laid-back rebels and fringe-of-society elements. Although the dashing action hero, Holland's also the kind of guy who walks around his ship in only his boxers, and Talho plays out well as the annoyed woman in his life who takes out her frustrations by ordering Renton around. Less welcome are the three brats who compose Eureka's "kids," who behave a little too maliciously towards Renton to be fully credible as needy orphans. Exactly why they regard Eureka as their mother, and she seems content to act as such, is a mystery to be explained in a later volume.

One of the other charms of the first volume Eureka 7 is that it doesn't take itself too seriously. It's more concerned at this stage with using light drama to set up its action sequences and liberally sprinkles situational humor amongst its episodes, such as Hilda's shopping efforts in episode 5. Sometimes it tries too hard to be funny, and so frequently does this with Renton that he's practically a buffoon by the end of the volume. There are suggestions of greater schemes and mysteries and deeper character interactions present, but this is a 50-episode series so its writing is in no hurry to explore them. While this could be just a sign of pacing, it could also indicate that it's shorter on plot and character development than, say, Fullmetal Alchemist, a series of comparable length, target audience, and comedy/action/drama balance which was nevertheless much denser in its early episodes. Time will tell on that.

The artistry has everything you'd expect from a Studio BONES production: interesting and varied character designs, solid background art, and color and textures variations between foreground and background art which are significant enough that the artistry sometimes doesn't have a fully-integrated look. Studio BONES also continues to have problems here with character depictions which can look clunky when seen at range. Mecha designs, while sharply-drawn, are nothing special, but the series fares much better than most when makings its character look distinct from generic anime chaff. Renton's a very regular-looking anime 14-year-old, but he's the exception. Eureka, again, is the brightest spot here, but Talho is effectively sexy, Holland is effectively cool and studly, and almost everyone else effectively looks the part they're supposed to play. The animation is quality work in every aspect, whether it's characters viewed walking from an odd angle, aerial mecha battles and "lifting" maneuvers, or the great expressiveness of characters' faces.

Eureka 7 relies on a mix of throbbing techno beats and soaring, dramatic musical numbers to back its action scenes, while background music during the day-to-day affairs on the Gekko is often more playful. The effectiveness of its use varies. The opening theme "Days," which is incongruous with its visuals, sound like something adopted from a late '70s/early '80s American TV series, while the string-backed closer is a more modern-sounding adult contemporary number.

The Bang Zoom!-produced English dub is a solid one overall, with most of the English cast members being particularly well-chosen for their roles. Although Stephanie Sheh is known more for her ADR script writing, a closer English vocal match to the seiyuu for Eureka could not be imagined, and Crispin Freeman feels like an excellent fit as Holland. The script also stays reasonably close to the original, and the original Japanese pronunciation of Eureka's name is retained rather than switching to the way it should be pronounced in English ("ur-eh-ka" vs. "yer-ee-ka"). The one problem spot is Johnny Yong Bosch's key performance as Renton, which unfortunately is a big problem since he has close to half the lines in this volume. Although Mr. Bosch has the tone, attitude, and delivery of the character down, he's straining too hard to pitch his voice right to match a performance originally done by a woman, which results in a whiny sound that may grate on the nerves. His performance would have been more palatable if he'd just given up on the pitch and let Renton sound a bit older. He's the sole reason I'm marking down the dub grade, though, so if you can tolerate him then you should find the dub to be a quite satisfying one.

Extras on this DVD include a clean opener, audio commentary for the first episode provided by the seiyuu for Renten and Eureka, and an interview with the same seiyuu. With five full episodes and a

base price of only $24.98, that makes for a great value for the regular release. The Special Edition adds a brown T-shirt emblazoned with the Gekkostate logo on the front and the series name down the back, a double-disc OST with translated liner notes, and the first volume of the companion manga adaptation, which covers some of the content in the first anime volume and a bit that will be in the second volume, for an additional $35. Considering that these items would have cost an additional $45+ separately, and the T-shirt isn't independently available, it's still a pretty good deal for the diehard Eureka 7 fan.

Despite its silly premise, Eureka 7 gets off to a good start by offering up great action sequences, an interesting title character, a diverse cast, and excellent animation. It's a series specifically designed to be "cool," an emphasis it has managed to pull off so far. This is only an introductory span, however, so whether or not it can maintain that emphasis once the story development starts fully kicking in remains to be seen.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : B
Animation : A-
Art : B+
Music : B

+ Thrilling action sequences, interesting title character.
− Lead English vocal performance, some artwork integration issues.

Renton tries to settle in to life on the Gekkostate, but finds that he has dedicated adversaries in Eureka's three "children," who are merciless in their efforts to try to drive him away from their "mother." The crew of the Gekkostate is little better, as they make Renton the subject of an elaborate gag which the oblivious Renton takes far more seriously than they expect. The crew isn't all fun and games, though, and some of the dark and painful secrets which originally caused the Gekkostate crew to strike out on their own come up when a job to capture a supposed anti-government agent takes an odd turn. News of a big trapar wave offers hope for a fun respite, but even it may not be enough to help Holland flee from the memories he so desperately wants to forget.

Review:

Episodes 6-10 can be looked upon as the doldrums of the first half of Eureka 7, as the action quotient is much lower here than in earlier episodes. The aerial mecha battles which highlighted the first volume are less frequent, appearing in only two episodes and in shorter allotments when they do appear. The focus instead falls much more on the interactions and relationships between various Gekkostate crew members. Of particular note is the gradually warming relationship between the earnest Renton and mostly oblivious Eureka, which offers an interesting reversal of typical male-female dynamics for teen anime romances. Most disappointing is the very formulaic construction of the "Renton vs. the kids" episode, although the next one involving the practical joke well compensates for it.

Although these episodes give the feeling of filler, in retrospect they contain enough content relevant to the overall plot to belie such a label. The Corallion, which will become prominent in the next volume, first gets mentioned here, and Anemone, who later becomes a key character, also makes her first appearance in this block. Throughout the volume viewers are fed tiny tidbits of plot which hint at a grand storyline, enough to whet a viewer's appetite but not enough to be at all satisfying. The character development is also not to be taken lightly, as it provides crucial (if incomplete) insight as to what some of the important characters are doing and why. A proper explanation for why the kids are on board is also offered in one

episode and some of Renton's speculations about Eureka point to mysteries yet to be solved. It may not be one of the more exciting volumes in the series, but over the long haul a viewer will probably look back at this one as a crucial set-up volume for what happens later.

As with many Studio BONES productions, this one is much more distinguished by its character designs and costuming than any other visual factor. The mecha, in humanoid or vehicle form, aren't terribly interesting or original-looking; only their use of boards to ride the Trapar waves (which seems physically impossible, but hey, that's never stopped mecha series before) visually distinguishes them from any of a dozen other mecha series out there. The character designs, though, are distinctive, especially in their use of facial expressions, and in most cases very pleasing to the eye. This is also one of the better examples you'll find of an anime where character personalities match physical appearances. The only disappointing design is the silly and too-angular look of Anemone, but the next volume will show that even her appearance is a good match for her personality.

Background art and use of a wide palette of sensible colors is generally quite good, contributing to an overall visual look that's just a step shy of being top-tier. A little more fan service is shown in these episodes than the previous block, including a couple of scenes that were altered for the TV broadcast but can now be seen uncut here. As with the last volume, the animation is quite good, although it has fewer truly good opportunities to show off and still uses the occasional shortcut, such as having characters talk with their mouths out of sight.

The reduced amount of action also reduces the use of the highlight soaring musical numbers, but the mix of techno beats and more playful numbers remains. Again, the score's effectiveness varies. The caliber of the English dub entirely comes down to what you think of Johnny Yong Bosch's take on Renton. Those who can grow accustomed to the somewhat strained style of his delivery should find this to be a satisfying dub overall, as all other roles are well-cast and, at worst, reasonably well-performed. It's less irritating than it was in the first volume, which may just be a matter of getting used to that voice. In any case it's the reason for the upgrade in dub grade since last volume.

Extras this time around include a clean closer and an audio commentary for episode 7 featuring three key seiyuu, which can also be accessed from the Audio options button on a DVD player's remote. Also present is a 16-minute Voice Actor Interview session with Stephanie Sheh, the English voice for Eureka. The questions are not only the typical inane fare one would expect from such an interview but are so obviously stock questions that she struggles to answer some of them given that she doesn't know any more about the series than someone who has just finished viewing this volume. Even so, it's an interesting interview because of how physically distinctive Ms. Sheh is; she's tiny (only 4' 9") but has a big and very expressive face, very unlike the character she voices.

When it comes right down to it, Eureka 7 is still basically an action series about airboarding mecha with a bit of romance thrown in, one that feeds on thrills and isn't above having a little fun with its characters. References to a darker side to the backgrounds of Holland, Talho, Eureka, and possibly the others do start popping up here, though, which shades the series towards a more dramatic structure than the pure action format it's used so far.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : B
Animation : A-
Art : B+

Music : B

+ Good artistry and technical merits, good development of character relationships.
− Anemone's design, less exciting than the first volume.

When a Coralion – a giant sphere of wind that generates powerful trapar waves – forms, the crew of the Gekkostate jumps at the chance to investigate it, even as Renton is trying to clarify what it is. Eureka, still not feeling well, forays out with Renton to try to penetrate the phenomenon. In the process they encounter Anemone, a half-crazed brat of a girl who has suspicious parallels to Eureka and, even more suspiciously, pilots an LFO which greatly resembles the Nirvash. Their meeting sends all three on a wild mind-trip that ultimately leaves both of the girls in a bad way, which forces Renton and Dominic Sorel to make an uneasy truce while they search for the medicine necessary to help both.

Review:

For most of episode 11 Eureka 7 muddles along like it has for the past few episodes: a bit of humor, a bit of drama, more cryptic comments, a new meteorological phenomenon first mentioned in ominous tones in the previous volume, and an odd caricature of a girl as a new character. In its last three minutes Anemone forays out in her Nirvash-like LFO called The End and strikes at the doldrums the series has been sliding into with all the force and electricity of a bolt of lightning. Within moments her up-close-and-personal encounter with the Nirvash and the manic fury she exudes rockets the intensity to incredible levels, giving the series a badly-needed jolt. Series are defined on scenes like the closing moments of episode 11, and for that scene alone this volume is well worth checking out. Anyone who is blasé about the series prior to that point is unlikely to be anymore when the closing credits roll.

The pulse-pounding peak is followed by one of the oddest episodes in the first half of the series, a bizarre trek through a dreamland that is apparently a mix of Renton and Anemone's making. Its content may or may not ultimately mean much, although it does serve to establish a deeper connection between Renton and Eureka than has previously been revealed. Like the rest of the series so far, it and its follow-up episode continue to raise questions (How are Anemone and Eureka connected? What does Renton's sister have to do with any of this?) without providing any answers. No answers will be found in episode 14, which marks the beginning of the series' second season, either; although it has a bit of new content, it is primarily a recap episode.

As the series completes its first quarter it's becoming increasingly clear that Eureka 7 is at least a bit more than the typical mecha action series it appeared to be at first. Sure, it can still deliver a nice action sequence and occasional light moments, but it's becoming increasingly clear that this is a more complex, developed, and edgy series than the norm for mecha or shonen titles. The principle characters are all a bit deeper than they appeared at first, with the "growing up" part of Renton's story being more involved and deliberate than the normal coming-of-age story. Anemone is a great, though not likeable, addition as a character whose attitude is as sharp-edged as her appearance but far more troubled and rotten. The series isn't (yet) delving into the psyches of its characters in the way that Neon Genesis Evangelion did, nor does it seem to be following that series' lead on subtly working in a message to the viewers, but the influence of NGE in the understructure is distinct enough that one wouldn't be surprised to see some psychoanalysis in the future. (And boy, could some of the characters in this series benefit from it!)

As before, the artistry is still very solid, making Eureka 7 one of the better-looking recent mecha series. Its character designs truly distinguish it artistically from other series, but the angular-to-the-point-of-caricature design for Anemone goes a lot too far. The End, on the other hand, is the sharpest mecha

design the series has yet produced. The animation has a tendency to exaggerate the motion of characters when they're walking but is otherwise quite good, contributing to some excellent action sequences. The most interesting visual effects come in the dream sequences, where tricks with shifting perspective create several nice individual shots. The series continues to take a minimalist approach to fan service, offering up only one such scene.

Any praise for the third volume has to start with the musical score, which is at its absolute best in the meeting of The End and Nirvash at the end of episode 11 and beginning of episode 12. The massive tension achieved by that scene is more a credit to the terrific background music than anything else. The quality and effectiveness of the score is generally higher throughout the rest of the volume after that. In addition to marking the beginning of the second season, episode 14 also introduces a new jazzy hip hop-flavored opener and jazzy closing number. Whether or not these are better than the original is a matter of personal preference.

By this point you either like Johnny Yong Bosch as the English voice of Renton or you don't, and his is pivotal performance on which the likeability of the English dub swings. The rest of the recurring English cast is fine, and Kari Wahlgreen is right on target, if not a slight improvement, in convincingly making Anemone sound like a maniacal brat. English scripting still stays reasonably close to the original.

The cast interview this time around features Mr. Bosch answering inane questions in a more entertaining fashion than normal. Those who prefer the original cast can opt for the Audio Commentary for episode 13, which features three of the key seiyuu. Other extras include a textless opener and a trailer for the Eureka 7 video game.

It's now official: Studio BONES has a winner on its hands with Eureka 7. Although the series had a dynamic start, this is the stretch where the dramatic elements turn the corner and start to get good. It deserves better TV ratings than it's getting.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : B+
Animation : A-
Art : B+
Music : A-

+ Musical score, solid storytelling, powerhouse mecha confrontation.
− A recap episode.

The freewheeling sky-surfers of Gekkostate embark on a newfangled health fad, which eventually leads them to an agricultural town that just happens to be Renton's childhood home. There he meets his uncle, whose military affiliation quickly lands Renton and his friends in trouble—but the real trouble begins when Renton saves the day by piloting the Nirvash unit without Eureka's guidance. The normally quiet Eureka becomes even more withdrawn, distancing herself from the Nirvash, Renton, and everyone else. When the Gekkostate stops in a cave for repairs, the crew becomes moody and restless; the discovery of ancient ruins and geological features still doesn't change the fact that they're broke and hungry. Worse yet, a prospective repairman and a digger living in the cave aren't all they appear to be. And how much longer will Eureka's bad mood last?

Review:

Just looking at the description, there may not be much to get excited about in this volume of Eureka 7. The high-flying intensity of the previous installment is a tough act to follow, and now we're stuck with a block of episodes that boils down to "Gekkostate gets stuck in a cave." Taking a break from the action opens up new possibilities, though; suddenly the crew's got a whole lot more time to think. Maybe too much time. Young hero Renton has another one of his weird dreams, crusty old commander Holland is being even more crusty than usual, and Eureka—well, whatever's going on with Eureka is anyone's guess. This is a time to look inward and ask where the characters are headed, and the answers could be more complex than anyone might expect.

Before things get all gloomy, however, there's still time for a little comedy and action. The health craze in Episode 15 brings its share of laughs: the entire crew performing Tai Chi, a sudden shortage of junk food, and misadventures in search of the nutritious puncha nut. (If that's not a pun, I don't know what is.) Even as the episode turns towards battle, the spirit of triumph still wins out—Renton piloting the Nirvash by himself and taking out the enemy is pure exhilaration in visual form. But Episode 16 inverts everything and becomes pure introspection in visual form: Renton, lost in the cave and mentally drained, succumbs to a dream sequence that sums up his conflicted feelings for Eureka. Of course, he wants to fly and develop his skills—but is it worth Eureka getting jealous over "her" machine? The story continues to develop on multiple levels, becoming even more mysterious when Eureka "takes a nap" and somehow enters Renton's dream.

After such emotional hand-wringing, Episode 17 is a welcome relief as Renton and the crewmembers head out to meet a repairman and do some male bonding. Although repairing the Gekkostate is the most obvious plot theme, Renton and Eureka's strained relationship is the real substance throughout this arc: the men of the ship tease Renton about his progress, while Hilda helps Eureka work out her feelings by putting it in concrete terms. Teen angst is truly universal, isn't it? The episode after that goes even further, pushing Renton into a deeper slump when he discovers that cool old guys aren't always all that cool. Confused about his world, confused about his goals, and confused about love—what these episodes lack in action, they make up for with serious character development. The only problem is that ending the disc on such a downer can feel unsatisfying for some.

No matter where the story heads, though, one can always expect strong visuals from the creative minds of Studio BONES. The climactic scenes of Episodes 15 and 16 show great versatility by way of contrast: the Nirvash maneuvering gracefully through a sunset sky—a very traditional sort of beauty—and then, one episode later, an explosion of surreal imagery in Renton's dream. Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater, an attempted apology to Eureka, LFO units drifting through the ceiling—it may not match the grand scope of the Coralian incident, but this scene still holds its own as a visual experiment. But the basics of animation are also handled well: the memorable character designs are as consistent as ever, with even one-time characters having a distinctive look, while high frame rates and attention to detail keep motion and action looking smooth. A diverse color palette makes this series attractive to watch, even in the darkness of the cave, with unusual textures and surprises waiting in the ruins.

A wide-ranging music score gives Eureka 7 a feeling that's both classic and modern—rich orchestral sounds dominate dramatic scenes, but rock and dance tracks are the genres of choice when the Nirvash takes to the sky. Either way, the results are always tuneful and fitting. The same might be said of the lively opening and ending songs: Home Made Kazoku's "Shounen Heart" captures the adventurous coming-of-age spirit through hip-hop, and Asami Izawa's catchy "Fly Away" says more of the same but with a soul flavor.

The many emotional scenes in these episodes are handled confidently in the English dub, with Johnny Yong Bosch leading the way as Renton. For a character that goes through several moods in each episode, he gets

all of them right, while still maintaining that youthful, high-pitched tone. Stephanie Sheh's Eureka is equally adept, although her rhythm could be more flowing. The supporting cast all turn in solid performances as well, and with a script that follows the subtitles closely (sometimes even matching word for word), this is one title that you could easily watch dubbed all the way through.

The Japanese voice cast still deserves their share of credit, though, being the main source of extras on this disc. Look forward to a full audio commentary (subtitled, of course) for Episode 15, and a 30-minute interview with Yuko Sanpei (Renton) and Kaori Nazuka (Eureka) discussing their characters and the show. Occasionally they mention episodes that haven't shown up on DVD yet, so consider that your spoiler alert—but the segment is still worth watching for their insights and humor.

Even as it winds down from the high intensity of the previous volume, Eureka 7 continues to be an engrossing series. These episodes turn to the inner world of the Gekkostate's crew, particularly Renton and Eureka's states of mind, and pose new challenges that can't be solved by simply piloting the Nirvash. In an underground cavern, history and technology are examined. In a surreal dreamworld, true feelings are discovered. In Eureka 7, a young boy's heart still has plenty of growing up to do.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : B
Animation : A-
Art : A
Music : B

+ Another high-quality block of episodes with a strong focus on characters and relationships.
− Not much action; doom-and-gloom story arc ends the disc on a depressing note.

Renton, Charles, and Ray start to feel comfortable living as a family, although on one of their jobs Renton learns a hard lesson about how people feel about the Vodarac when he tries to help a Vodarac girl who is deathly ill. Both Charles and Renton have been keeping secrets from each other about their true identities and affiliations, however, and a time ultimately comes when Renton must decide where his priorities lie: staying with the people he's coming to regard as the parents he never had, or returning to Eureka. Meanwhile Gekkostate is in turmoil as the recovering Eureka pines for the missing Renton and Holland must come to terms with the fact that Eureka has clearly chosen Renton and not him. As a showdown with the military and Charles and Ray becomes imminent, Eureka also finally decides where her priorities – and heart – really lie. In the midst of conflict two young people seek each other out.

Review:

Eureka 7 has had flashy action scenes and a certain "cool" factor going for it from the start, but what has separated it from the pack over the course of time is an Evangelion-like devotion to character development. All that set-up effort put in over the first few volumes pays big dividends in this one, as the focus of the first three episodes remains firmly on its characters and what they are thinking and feeling. These are not just your cookie-cutter stereotypes anymore, as each of the core cast members has stepped at least a bit beyond the norm. Eureka is hardly the first person in an anime series who struggles to understand and cope with an unfamiliar emotion called love, but she does it more convincingly than most, and the

tension generated between Holland and Talho (and within Holland himself) over his reluctance to confront Renton's growing importance to Eureka, instead of him, is palpable; as cool as he may be, Holland is also deeply flawed, but that makes him all the more interesting. Renton continues to struggle through his own growing pains as he tries to deal with the consequences of violence and come to a decision over where his priorities lie, while Charles and Ray make one of the neatest anime couples to come along in quite a while.

All of this character development and philosophizing about growth, finding a purpose, and discovering who you are lay the drama on pretty thick, at the cost of a complete absence of humorous elements. It also restricts nearly all of the true action to the latter half of episode 26. The payoff, however, is more than worth the wait, as the aptly-titled "Morning Glory" proves to be one of those gloriously transcendent episodes in anime, one where everything comes together so perfectly that you can't help being swept up in the moment even when you know exactly what's coming – in this case, the inevitable joyous reunion of Renton and Eureka. In the initial Adult Swim broadcast it was one of 2006's best anime moments, but it also marks a major turning point in the series; all confusion and denial over who Eureka is ultimately going to connect with is now over, Holland finally settles on a new purpose that will define his character for the rest of the series, and the path towards the eventual series resolution is now set. It also throws in a couple of arcane references that do not mean much right now but will have a bigger impact later on. (Pay careful attention to what Charles and Holland are saying as the scene continues through the closing credits.) In short, the last ten minutes of episode 26 sets the stage for the entire second half of the series.

Crucial to the success of these episodes is the voice acting in both dubs, but fortunately the English acting has improved enough to be exactly on-the-mark with the original Japanese performances, especially in the more emotional moments. Some small variances between the English and Japanese scripts do alter meaning a tiny bit in a couple of scenes, but not in a significant way, and in general the English script stays pretty tight. The one place where the translation becomes slightly awkward is in one scene in episode 23 where Renton explains to Charles that he has difficulty calling him and Ray "Papa" and "Mama" instead of "Mom" and "Dad," as the reason why Renton is saying it that way may not be entirely clear unless one listens to the original Japanese and knows common honorifics. Also notable is the way the "to be continued" statements are handled throughout this batch of episodes; only Renton's VA voices them while he is alone, but Renton and Eureka say it together after they are reunited.

The visuals and animation are still at their best in the limited number of dynamic action sequences spread across these four episodes, which are full of movement as LFOs and characters on individual boards zip around the sky, their trapar trails flashing in their wake. The series also puts more effort than most into animating backgrounds, which becomes especially apparent in episode 26 if one watches closely. Designs for younger characters are excellent, for adults less so; Holland is a little too sharp-jawed, and Charles and Ray are both a little too angular and somewhat inconsistently drawn. Mecha designs, as usual for the series, are well-drawn but nothing spectacular until seen with their armor stripped off, while airship designs distinguish themselves much more. (Ever notice how the military airships seem to be patterned off of the series' skyfish?) Though it does not use the bright palette of colors so common in recent digitally-colored anime series, Eureka 7 is nonetheless beautifully colorful, especially in the scenes set in the Sea of Rainbow Clouds. Quality control is a little too lax for this volume to be considered top-tier artistically, but it is nonetheless a quite good-looking series.

Musical themes used in these four episodes do not offer much that is fresh or new, although its established themes get used quite well in key dramatic and action scenes. Sometimes the music comes off as grandiose, but often that is matched by the nature of the scene playing out at the time, and the soundtrack does know when to be quiet, too. The second opener remains in use throughout this volume, while the second closer holds position for episodes 23-25; episode 26 reverts to the original opening theme, which plays in the background as the scene finishes and the credits roll.

Extras this time around include an audio commentary by Japanese staff and seiyuu for episode 26, another video game trailer, and a textless closer for episode 26. This volume's edition of the Voice Actor Interview features the seiyuu for Holland and Talho in a dual interview. The Special Edition version also includes an exclusive T-shirt and volume four of the accompanying manga.

The drama and character development piles on heavily as the series reaches its midway point, but the end-of-season payoff is equally big as the stage is set for the second half of the series run. Even if you've been following the series on Adult Swim and haven't bothered to purchase previous volumes, this one is worth getting if for no other reason than the replay value of episode 26.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : A-
Animation : A
Art : B+
Music : B+

+ Sharp animation, good characterizations, triumphant reunion scene.
− Musical score sometimes goes a little overboard, some adult character designs are inconsistent.

Renton and Eureka are both back on the Gekkostate but under punishment for leaving without permission. Holland, finally accepting that Eureka has chosen Renton and not him, resolves to protect them at all costs and prepares for an inevitable confrontation with Charles and Ray Beam. Although they backed off during the previous climatic battle, they are intent on carrying out their original mission and also rescuing Renton from the "monster" that has claimed him, and when determined former SOF members face off against each other, it can only end in bloodshed. In the wake of that incident Renton and Eureka decide to promote a new mindset on the ship through cleaning and cooking, an endeavor which leads to the dramatic revelation of the Gekkostate's true purpose and Eureka's true identity. The evolving state of the Nirvash and medical problems of one crew member cause the Gekkostate to head to Tresor Laboratories, the installation originally responsible for building the Type Zero and the one most connected to Eureka's past.

Meanwhile Dominic continues his investigation of Renton by paying a visit to Bell Forest.

Review:

Episodes 27-30, which mark the beginning of the second season, also lie at the heart of a run of episodes (begun with episode 26) which constitute the series' peak. Although it may not include as much action as other four-episode blocks, nowhere else in the series is the pacing and plotting more fluid or devoid of the padding and overbearing "growing up" euphemisms which litter the whole of the series. In fact, so thinly-spread is the meaty content of the series that in no other place before or after this volume – not even at the end – will you find such a wealth of critical events so close together. In these four episodes you have: two significant character deaths, one key cast member who undergoes a major make-over, the beginning of a major revamping of the Nirvash, the revelation of the Gekkostate's true purpose, the revelation of how Holland is connected to Renton's older sister Diane (although the details won't come out until much later), the revelation of why Ray so hates Eureka, and most importantly, the long-awaited revelation of Eureka's true identity. Most viewers who are watching these episodes for the first time will not see that

stunning truth coming, although it certainly does explain a lot of things that have transpired prior to that point.

The theme of "growing up and learning to accept responsibility" is so integral to the series that it cannot be entirely set aside, however. Up until this point Holland has, for all his seeming age and experience, been acting as immaturely as Renton has, but that changes as he get locked into his new purpose and pursues it ruthlessly. Talho also becomes convinced that it's time for her to act more mature, while Renton proves that he has grown up a bit by not being thrown for a loop by learning what makes Eureka special. Despite essentially becoming villains for this volume, Charles and Ray continue to prove that they are the series' best supporting characters, while most of the rest of the supporting cast just muddles along as normal.

The first two episodes of this volume also represents the most explicit and brutal violence in the series to date; parts of "Helter Skelter" (aka episode 27) in particular are not for the squeamish. They mark the development of a more consistently heavier tone that is only briefly interrupted by lighter-hearted content in episodes 29 and 30. The intense action of episode 27, somber drama and flashbacks of episode 28, and revelations and resolutions of episode 29 are all executed so well that those drawn to the series for its more high-spirited elements, humor, and thrilling mecha action may not mind, however.

As always, the series makes good use of its electronica-dominated musical score and the occasional insert songs to heighten tension, push light-hearted or dramatic scenes along, or give the series a cool-sounding groove, especially in episode 28. Episode 27 introduces both a new opener and a new closer, both of which were truncated for the [adult swim] broadcast to only include their highlights but actually sounded better that way; how either stacks up against the earlier openers and closers is purely a matter of personal taste. Curiously, the artistry for the opener looks much rougher than in the rest of the series, while the closer artistry features an unidentified female character.

The good-but-not-spectacular artistry and solid animation remain constant with the quality seen in previous volumes despite having fewer flashy battle scenes to exploit. Though less sexy, the new look for Talho by the end of the volume is a sharp one, and the stripped-down look of the Nirvash provides interesting insight as to what lies at the core of LFOs. Charles and Ray, despite their more angular looks, remain distinctive and appealing characters visually, although Holland looks a bit odd in his counterinsurgency get-up. These episodes also offer a tiny bit of fan service and quite a larger amount of blood and gore.

The English dub also maintains the level of quality seen in more recent volumes. While unlikely to blow anyone away or overly impress sub fans, it is definitely sufficient for anyone who normally tolerates dubs. The English script stays relatively tight through this stretch, avoiding any significant changes.

The regular version of the DVD release includes a clean version of the opener, another video game trailer, and an audio commentary for episode 27 done by a quartet of key seiyuu. The Voice Actor Interview this time features Kate Higgins, who voices Talho here (and has done major work elsewhere) but wears a T-shirt reminding viewers that she is probably even better-known as the English voice for Sakura in Naruto. The Special Edition version also includes volume four of the manga adaptation, the second OST, and the second T-shirt.

If you are using the DVDs to watch the series for the first time then Volume 7 gets the second season off to a strong start, a standard that it, unfortunately, does not maintain for long. If you are picking up some of the DVDs after watching the series on [adult swim] then this volume is one of a handful in the series worthy of picking up for repeat viewings.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-

Overall (sub) : A-
Story : A-
Animation : B+
Art : B+
Music : A-

+ Best pacing and plotting in the series, major revelations.
− Little for mecha action.

Evangelion: 1.11 You Are [Not] Alone (2011-04-12 21:59)

In 2000 the Second Impact occurred, flooding the world and killing nearly half its population. Fifteen years later gigantic beings called Angels have appeared with the apparent intent of finding Lilith, the Second Angel, and thus initiating the Third Impact to finish the job. Lilith is concealed deep under the headquarters of the organization NERV, however, and NERV has developed the one weapon capable of stopping the Angels: biomechanical humanoids called Evangelions, giant mecha which synchronize with specially-chosen youths and can generate their own AT fields, a force field-like defense which makes the Angels mostly invulnerable to conventional weaponry. Shinji Ikari, 14-year-old son of NERV director Gendo Ikari, is one such youth, the so-called Third Child, and has been called to Tokyo-3 for exactly that purpose. Though reluctant to help a father who has never had a relationship with him and nearly overwhelmed by both the burden of responsibility placed on him and the horror of battling the Angels, Shinji assumes his expected role, battling a trio of Angels with the support of the entire NERV staff behind him and, in the last case, with the assistance of the mysterious First Child, Rei Ayanami, in her own Evangelion. Behind the scenes, his father and the even more secretive organization SEELE carry out ulterior motives which seem to have everything to do with the Angels' onslaught.

Review:

Like it or not, respect it or not, the original 1995 Neon Genesis Evangelion TV series is one of the rare anime titles which can legitimately be called a landmark in anime. It took the seminal mecha concept of a boy piloting a giant robot built by his father and redefined what could be done with it, in the process revamping a stagnating genre, introducing influential new production methods, and exposing anime to serious scholarly analysis for the first time. Its rampant use of symbolism (some of which, producer Gainax's staff later admitted, was used purely for visual effect) and highly subjectively interpretable content, combined with a decided anti-hero at its center, made it one of the most controversial anime titles ever, and it has remained one of the most enduringly popular of all anime franchises; even more than a decade after its last original content, it and its characters still regularly ranked very high in fan polls, and even before the Rebuild of Evangelion project began, its franchise's revenues could, by some accounts, be measured in the billions of U.S. dollars. Though its popularity seemed to be waning some by late 2007, Japanese fans still crowded theaters to (literally) standing room-only attendance upon the premier of the first of the planned four movies intended to remake and revamp the original series. Given the franchise's pedigree, it's only natural that licensor Funimation would prioritize it for Blu-Ray release.

For those familiar with the original series, the first movie directly adapts the first six episodes of the series. Little more than minor tweaks and trimming are apparent until the run-up to the battle with the octahedronal sixth Angel towards the end of the movie, where Misato (Shinji's handler, for the uninitiated)

shows him something important that he did not get exposed to until much later in the TV series. Director Hideaki Anno takes full advantages of the technical advances in animation CG since 1995 to give the sixth Angel's combat style a fantastic overhaul, but even more significant is the scene which ends the movie, one which makes it clear that these movies are going to at least partly head in new directions. Along the way the movie not only retains but also in some ways improves upon the key elements of the series: the touchy interpersonal dynamics, Shinji's struggle to find a purpose for himself, and the edge-of-your-seat intensity of the combat scenes.

And it is in that intensity where the movie triumphs most gloriously. One of the most underappreciated of the original series' strengths, the intensity ratchets up so effectively here that, even if you know precisely what's coming, it is hard to resist tensing up while watching these high-impact spectacles. No one does better than Anno when it comes to convincingly placing characters in the midst of hellish blasts, and no mecha title has ever done better at showing how savage mecha fights can be when they get up close and personal. (In fact, the original NGE was an innovator in this regard.) A soundtrack which mixes standbys from the original series with dramatic new pieces is a key contributor here, as is the staging and writing, but ultimately the visuals are the star this time.

Of course, all of the psychological issues that the original series is famous for are still around. Volumes can be (and have been) written about all the baggage Shinji totes around, about how he plays out much more like a typical angst-crippled 14-year-old thrown into an impossible situation than the expected self-collected hero. (How many real 14-year-olds would not freak out under circumstances like Shinji's?) Rei is still the even more socially maladjusted one, a girl who is clearly not devoid of emotion but has great difficulty expressing it or making a connection with anyone, while Misato is still the sexy mix of looseness and intensity, although in this rendition one gets the sense a bit earlier that she, too, has lingering issues. Not enough has been seen at this point of Gendo Ikari for anyone new to the franchise to get much of a feel for where he is coming from, but this movie serves much more to lay the foundation for the greater story than to actually carry it out.

The visuals were the aspect most in need of an update, for while the original artistry was hardly bad, it is outclassed by the sharper productions of the past few years. This release gives us a chance to see what Anno can do with the story with a full array of CG effects and digital coloring at his disposal, and the result is impressive. Characters retain their distinctively lithe original designs but look a bit more rounded and have a greater sense of depth, the Evas still have the sleek, monstrous look that they are famous for, and blasts and bursts flash on the screen with increased vigor. Minor flaws in quality control do occasionally show through in calmer scenes, and the faithfully-reproduced girl's school uniform is still one of the most drab designs to be found in any anime series, but all of the upgrades in the visuals will not disappoint returning viewers and should impress newer ones. The animation, too, is better than it ever was in the series, although it still takes the occasional shortcut. It impresses most in the inventive redefinition of the Angels, especially how the third one attacks. Also look for massive amounts of splashing blood (Or is that LCL fluid?) and about the same amount of fan service as the original series saw, including the classic scene where Shinji gets caught off-guard by the appearance of Misato's pet penguin.

Funimation's English dub recasts most of the roles, which in some cases is a big improvement (many of the original minor supporting role performances were weak) and in other cases is a disappointment. (John Swasey is adequate as Gendo but does not carry quite the sly tone of Tristan MacAvery's richer, more iconic original performance.) In still other places the changes made little or no difference; Rei's subdued voice and speaking patterns are relatively easy to replicate, for instance, and she does not display much emotion through this movie's content anyway. Funimation did get the irreplaceable Spike Spencer back to play Shinji, however, and along with Allison Keith-Shipp reprising her original role as Misato, they ably anchor the cast in its key performances. While the English script does take some liberties, it does not change things overly much.

The Blu-Ray version brings the expected upgrade in picture quality, but its value varies from scene to scene. It shines when the animation and artistry is at its best and simply more clearly reveals minor flaws when quality control sags. This version does, however, upgrade the sound to Dolby 6.1 True HD on both the English and Japanese language tracks and includes the Extras conspicuously absent from the 1.01 DVD release. Among these are a series of Japanese news alerts about the movie, a promo music video using the "Angel of Doom" theme from the climactic battle scene, and several trailers keyed to either this movie's closing number "Beautiful World" or "Fly Me to the Moon," the original TV series' closer. One of them, though (the first one on the list) is for the second movie, not this one. Also included are two versions of the 15-minute Rebuild of Evangelion creation piece, one set to a variation on the franchise's baseline theme and another set to a widely-recognizable piece by Joseph-Maurice Ravel. Not an especially meaty set!

If you have not yet gotten the first Evangelion movie and have a Blu-Ray player then this is unquestionably the version you want to get. If you have the 1.01 release then the value of upgrading to this one is questionable unless you have a full set of proper equipment and place a high priority on maximum available video resolution. If you are not familiar with the franchise then this one is certainly worth a look, as it delivers well as both an action-oriented piece and a dramatic psychological study. With the strongest parts of the original series still yet to be adapted and hints about a new character coming into the picture, the best may even still be yet to come.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : A-
Animation : B+
Art : A-
Music : A-

+ Big upgrades in artistry, captures all of the psychology and intensity of the original.
− Some minor quality control flaws, story feels just a little rushed in places.

Eureka 7 (2011-04-16 05:46)

Renton tries to settle in to life on the Gekkostate, but finds that he has dedicated adversaries in Eureka's three "children," who are merciless in their efforts to try to drive him away from their "mother." The crew of the Gekkostate is little better, as they make Renton the subject of an elaborate gag which the oblivious Renton takes far more seriously than they expect. The crew isn't all fun and games, though, and some of the dark and painful secrets which originally caused the Gekkostate crew to strike out on their own come up when a job to capture a supposed anti-government agent takes an odd turn. News of a big trapar wave offers hope for a fun respite, but even it may not be enough to help Holland flee from the memories he so desperately wants to forget.

Review:

Episodes 6-10 can be looked upon as the doldrums of the first half of Eureka 7, as the action quotient is much lower here than in earlier episodes. The aerial mecha battles which highlighted the first volume are less frequent, appearing in only two episodes and in shorter allotments when they do appear. The focus instead falls much more on the interactions and relationships between various Gekkostate crew members.

Of particular note is the gradually warming relationship between the earnest Renton and mostly oblivious Eureka, which offers an interesting reversal of typical male-female dynamics for teen anime romances. Most disappointing is the very formulaic construction of the "Renton vs. the kids" episode, although the next one involving the practical joke well compensates for it.

Although these episodes give the feeling of filler, in retrospect they contain enough content relevant to the overall plot to belie such a label. The Corallion, which will become prominent in the next volume, first gets mentioned here, and Anemone, who later becomes a key character, also makes her first appearance in this block. Throughout the volume viewers are fed tiny tidbits of plot which hint at a grand storyline, enough to whet a viewer's appetite but not enough to be at all satisfying. The character development is also not to be taken lightly, as it provides crucial (if incomplete) insight as to what some of the important characters are doing and why. A proper explanation for why the kids are on board is also offered in one episode and some of Renton's speculations about Eureka point to mysteries yet to be solved. It may not be one of the more exciting volumes in the series, but over the long haul a viewer will probably look back at this one as a crucial set-up volume for what happens later.

As with many Studio BONES productions, this one is much more distinguished by its character designs and costuming than any other visual factor. The mecha, in humanoid or vehicle form, aren't terribly interesting or original-looking; only their use of boards to ride the Trapar waves (which seems physically impossible, but hey, that's never stopped mecha series before) visually distinguishes them from any of a dozen other mecha series out there. The character designs, though, are distinctive, especially in their use of facial expressions, and in most cases very pleasing to the eye. This is also one of the better examples you'll find of an anime where character personalities match physical appearances. The only disappointing design is the silly and too-angular look of Anemone, but the next volume will show that even her appearance is a good match for her personality.

Background art and use of a wide palette of sensible colors is generally quite good, contributing to an overall visual look that's just a step shy of being top-tier. A little more fan service is shown in these episodes than the previous block, including a couple of scenes that were altered for the TV broadcast but can now be seen uncut here. As with the last volume, the animation is quite good, although it has fewer truly good opportunities to show off and still uses the occasional shortcut, such as having characters talk with their mouths out of sight.

The reduced amount of action also reduces the use of the highlight soaring musical numbers, but the mix of techno beats and more playful numbers remains. Again, the score's effectiveness varies. The caliber of the English dub entirely comes down to what you think of Johnny Yong Bosch's take on Renton. Those who can grow accustomed to the somewhat strained style of his delivery should find this to be a satisfying dub overall, as all other roles are well-cast and, at worst, reasonably well-performed. It's less irritating than it was in the first volume, which may just be a matter of getting used to that voice. In any case it's the reason for the upgrade in dub grade since last volume.

Extras this time around include a clean closer and an audio commentary for episode 7 featuring three key seiyuu, which can also be accessed from the Audio options button on a DVD player's remote. Also present is a 16-minute Voice Actor Interview session with Stephanie Sheh, the English voice for Eureka. The questions are not only the typical inane fare one would expect from such an interview but are so obviously stock questions that she struggles to answer some of them given that she doesn't know any more about the series than someone who has just finished viewing this volume. Even so, it's an interesting interview because of how physically distinctive Ms. Sheh is; she's tiny (only 4' 9") but has a big and very expressive face, very unlike the character she voices.

When it comes right down to it, Eureka 7 is still basically an action series about airboarding mecha with a bit of romance thrown in, one that feeds on thrills and isn't above having a little fun with its characters. References to a darker side to the backgrounds of Holland, Talho, Eureka, and possibly the others do start popping up here, though, which shades the series towards a more dramatic structure than the pure action format it's used so far.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : B
Animation : A-
Art : B+
Music : B

\+ Good artistry and technical merits, good development of character relationships.
− Anemone's design, less exciting than the first volume.

Evangelion 2.22: You Can [Not] Advance (2011-04-16 22:02)

At NERV's Euro Base, the dissected and carefully-studied Third Angel attempts a break-out, forcing Mari, an enthusiastic new pilot, to use the makeshift Eva Unit-05 to do battle. Back in Japan, Shinji and his father meet at his mother's grave, but building a relationship between father and son is not so simple when neither really knows how to act around the other. On the return to NERV HQ the Seventh Angel arrives, but so does Captain Asuka Langley Shikinami, the Second Child, and her Eva Unit-02, to deal with that problem. Shinji quickly discovers that the temperamental Asuka is moving in with him and Misato and that her issues with relating to other people are just as serious as his and Rei's. The three pilots get their first chance to work together against the Eighth Angel, and an outing to an oceanographic institute allows them to build on their opportunities to socialize and gradually break out of their shells. Shinji also meets and befriends NERV Tokyo branch newcomer Kaji (a past associate of Misato and Ritsuko), Rei becomes dissatisfied enough with the passionless life she leads to try to get more actively involved socially, and even loner Asuka finds herself talking seriously to someone (Misato) for the first time. Shinji's brief encounter with the mysterious Mari signals a turning point which places a major roadblock in the path of all of them advancing, however, as the Ninth Angel comes in a devastatingly unexpected form and the Tenth Angel strikes when NERV is at its most vulnerable.

The second Evangelion movie was subtitled "Break" partly as a reference to a traditional Japanese technique used in drama and the martial arts. The name could not be more apt, because while the movie does reinterpret certain scenes from episodes 8-19 of the TV series, most of them happen in at least partly different ways which meaningfully change the thrust of the story; something as simple as Rei preventing Asuka from slapping her in the famous elevator scene carries weight because of what it implies about the different direction Rei will go this time. This version of Asuka is distinct from the get-go, too, as she is less bratty and more aggressively antisocial than the first one. She may have initially seemed to be the most socially adjusted Eva pilot in the TV series, but here she makes no pretenses about liking anyone – not even Kaji, whom she hopelessly mooned over in the TV series but doesn't give a second thought here – and seems motivated as much by establishing herself in a future career path in NERV as she is by her personal pride. She is quicker to show her vulnerabilities here, too.

The other part of the "Break" is, of course, the new content. While the general thrust of the story re-

mains similar to the TV series, there are some entirely new events and scenes here (the stuff on the moon, Rei's planned dinner party), but none of those are as bold an addition as the new pilot. Mari's liveliness and enthusiasm cuts such a sharp contrast to the established Eva pilots that her addition feels incongruous, but that is likely the point: she is intended to shake up the status quo and show that one does not have to be socially maladjusted to pilot an Eva. Though she plays an important role in two of the movies' big fight scenes, she does not get enough screen time here for viewers to figure out much about her motives or purpose, but she is the breath of fresh air that the franchise needs and helps restore the sense of mystery inherent in the original series. On a more minor note, Toji's sister, whom we heard mention of but never saw in the original series, gets a momentary appearance here.

The other big story here is the visual upgrade, which varies between being merely very good and utterly spectacular. Like Evangelion 1.11, this movie takes advantage of CG animation in everything ranging from modeling Eva movements to depicting trains to animating crowds moving in the backgrounds. Occasionally this looks a little stiff (especially the crowd movement scenes), but the rest of the time it provides a distinct upgrade. Character renderings and animation, while improved, are not always completely refined, but this was also a minor issue in the first movie. Backgrounds and scenes of clouds moving in the sky look great, however, and the Angel design and action scene upgrades are nothing short of astounding. The TV series is justly famous for reimagining how mecha move and fight, and now director Hideaki Anno has the budget and technical tools to truly exploit the distinctive Eva way of combat. AT Fields get used for dramatic offensive and defensive purposes, Evas awaken or go into Beast Mode, Angels change shape or grow extra arms when two are not enough, and the infamous Dummy System take on a creepy new form. Collateral destruction happens on a more massive and carefully-detailed level, too. Not one shred of the original series' renowned intensity is lost in the upgrade; in fact, these are some of the most intense mecha battles ever done in animation, with graphic content in some battles strong enough that it could make some viewers queasy. Fan service gets a decided upgrade, too, as we get to see a lot more of Asuka (she gets her own version of Shinji's nude scene from episode 2 of the TV series) and see her generally wearing skimpier clothing around the apartment. Late scenes also include some defined nudity, much like what was seen in End of Evangelion. While the religious symbolism this time is mostly restricted to the cross-shaped blasts and some naming conventions, less obvious examples of it are still there if one looks carefully; the oceanographic institute's layout distinctly (and certainly not coincidentally) resembles the Kabbalan Tree of Life, for instance.

The musical choices used for this movie are also particularly interesting. Shiro Sagisu, who has directed the music for all of the Evangelion content (and is probably equally well-known for Bleach), outright borrows or revamps several themes from the TV series but also crafts an eclectic collection of new ones. Some scenes have electric guitar twang, while others have gentle piano numbers or lightly jazzy trumpet-based numbers. Two combat scenes gets heavily dramatic music set to Latin-sounding vocals, but the peak moments of the most gruesome one are set to a gentle, vocalized children's song which, paradoxically, makes the scenes all the more horrific and the series' climactic moment, with all its intensity, is backed by an equally gentle-sounding anthem; both of the latter two are sung by Rei seiyuu Megumi Hayashibara backed by a children's chorus. That all of this works is almost as amazing as some of the choices made. The closing theme "Beautiful World," by top Japanese pop star Hikaru Utada, is also a winner.

The biggest story on the dub front is that longtime anime veteran Tiffany Grant does, indeed, reprise her iconic performance as Asuka, and she adapts well to the tweaks in her character in this version (if sometimes reluctantly, as she laments in the audio commentary that she did not get to infuse any German into the role this time). Amongst other new roles, J. Michael Tatum makes an acceptable replacement for Aaron Krohn as Kaji and Trina Nishimura is a good fit for Mari in what was apparently a highly-desired role. Casting and performances on minor roles continues to be solid and Spike Spencer does an admirable job handling the challenging vocal straining required of Shinji in certain late scenes. The writing in this movies shades Shinji more away from his traditionally whiny nature and Spike is right on the money with that, too.

The English script uses a bit more swearing than any previous Evangelion production but never sacrifices direct meaning or nuance in its revisions and, thankfully, keeps certain terminology the same as it was in the TV series dub even though the subtitles translates some of them differently.

Funimation's production of the Blu-Ray release is an impressive technical achievement. The sound mixing, which uses Dolby TrueHD for both dub tracks, gives the movie a wonderfully full-bodied sound with lots of attention to minor details. The video is in full 1080p using a MPEG-4 AVC codec, which produces one of the highest-grade picture qualities likely to be found amongst anime Blu-Ray releases; it is good enough, in fact, to bring out some minor artistic flaws which might not otherwise have been readily noticeable. The single disk comes packed with Extras, including an assortment of Japanese promos and commercials, an alternate version of the song used in the climactic scene, a quartet of deleted scenes voiced and animated at the storyboard level (and all of them were wisely deleted and/or worked into other scenes), and "Rebuild of Evangelion 2.02," a 22-minute feature which follow the artistic development of various scenes through various layers of production. It also has an English commentary featuring ADR Director Mike McFarland talking, in 10-15 minute segments, with all of the principle cast members and one of the sound engineers – and yes, that does include a rare commentary appearance by Spike Spencer. It covers, in total, the first hour and a half of the movie before defaulting to the English dub for the rest and is probably most interesting for comparing the varying level of VA familiarity with the title and its hard-core fandom. Also included in the bright orange case is a 16 page booklet which features nice renditions of Asuka and Mari, assorted production and design notes, a glossary of both content and production terminology, and brief character, Eva, and Angel blurbs. Those pre-ordering from Right Stuf also apparently got a NERV car window sticker as an added bonus.

Evangelion 2.22 is one of the rare anime movies that is as much an event as it is a movie. It is a glorious and exciting redefinition of the original series which strikes new ground without sacrificing the depth, drama, intensity, or humor which helped make the TV series the enduring classic that it is. At times it feels like it is rushing things a little, and certainly those who have not seen the TV series will not get quite as much out of it, but it delivers wonderfully on everything that it is supposed to do. The final post-credits scene and Next Movie preview will only drive fans into a frenzy over the all-new content of the as-yet-unscheduled third movie, and as anime franchises go, that's never a Bad Thing.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : A-
Animation : A
Art : A-
Music : A

\+ Glorious and intense action sequences, exciting new developments, inventive visual upgrades, quality Blu-Ray production.
− Sometimes rushes things a little, minor artistic bugs.

Full Metal Panic review (2011-04-20 22:04)

Black Technology has allowed for the existence in modern day of what once seemed like sci fi elements, most notably mecha, super-submarines, and devices like the Lambda Driver, which can convert a mecha pilot's thoughts and impulses into reality. The Whispered are special individuals who have an innate comprehension of Black Technology, which makes them highly sought-after by certain interests intent on exploiting their

abilities. Sixteen year-old Jindai High School class rep Kaname Chidori, unbeknownst to herself, is one such individual, so the secretive, champions of justice-leaning mercenary organization Mithril sends a team to covertly guard her, including one undercover agent: Arm Slave (read: mecha) specialist Sousuke Sagara, a teenage soldier who knows everything military-related but almost nothing else. Ill-suited to civilian life, Sousuke bumbles his way through school in obsessive military nut fashion, irritating Kaname in the process, but during an attempt by villains to use a hijacked school trip as a cover for kidnapping Kaname, his true merits shine through, as do hints of Kaname's ability and a possible mutual attraction. Over the course of several later adventures their stormy relationship develops. While Kaname eventually finds out that she has a potential romantic rival in Teletha "Tessa" Testarossa, the wunderkind teenage captain of the super-sub on which Sousuke's team is based, Sousuke continues to be plagued by the seemingly immortal Gauron, an especially skilled and amoral mercenary who has been a hated enemy of Sousuke's since childhood.

Review:

While it would be a stretch to regard the original FMP as a classic, iconic, and/or landmark mecha series, it is without question one of the most prominent and popular mecha series of the early 2000s. As one of the rare mecha titles which successfully crosses genre lines, it succeeds almost as well as a school-based romantic comedy as it does as a more serious, mecha-based action-adventure tale, though the dichotomy between its two principle genres typically forces it to alternate between modes rather than smoothly blend them; that is, in fact, arguably the series' biggest flaw, although it is likely more directly the product of the series being based on multiple entries in a popular lite novel series. Even so, the series has enough other merits to warrant a strong recommendation.

At the core of the series are its central couple and the situation which brings them together. Sousuke is a classic fish-out-of-water character, a young man so narrowly-focused on his duties that he is utterly unable to integrate smoothly into a non-military setting like a typical high school. This opens up a wealth of humor possibilities, such as Sousuke's notion on what a condom is best used for (and it's not what you'd think), his regular overreactions to perceived threats, his image of an ideal security gate for an upcoming school festival, or his inappropriate use of military equipment in a school setting. Kaname, meanwhile, is a mold-defining tsundere overachiever, a bold, brassy, physical character who displays a natural range of emotion and can comfortably show her vulnerable side without ever actually seeming helpless or sacrificing her independent spirit; this is a girl who could probably muddle through most of her trouble spots even without Sousuke to rescue her. Her attitude can get a little abrasive at times, but it also allows her to deal with Sousuke in entertaining fashion while also developing signs of a potential romantic interest. The notion that Sousuke is trying (almost literally) to be her Knight in Shining Armor despite how much he frustrates her is a constant source of amusement. Surrounding them is a complementary cast which includes the cheery playboy Kurz Weber, the earthy Melissa Mao, and brilliant but clumsy Tessa. Opposing them is Gauron, who makes a great villain but comes back from seeming death (at least) one too many times.

The mecha side of things also carries its own hefty entertainment value. The existence of the Lambda Driver gives the battles some super-powered juice, but thankfully the series never fully relies on that, instead opting to include many opportunities for more mundane action. That also keeps the series from straying too much into the "undefeatable super-mecha" zone, although it does flirt with this problem from time to time. The mecha side also tends to be much weightier, especially the rather dark, mid-run Helmajistan arc.

The series never forgets its obligation to insert occasional doses of fan service, either. Though the fan service is hardly pervasive or even frequent, it does give all of the most prominent female characters at least some opportunity to flash some skin and includes a few very random-seeming panty shots scattered

over the course of 24 episodes. Astute fans may also catch a few pop culture references, including ones to Slayers, assorted Gundam titles, and the works of J.R.R. Tolkein and Douglas Adams.

Gonzo's effort on FMP's artistry was near top-of-the-line for its time and still stands up well even against glitzy recent titles, although the CG modeling used to animate the Tuatha de Danaan and an American submarine may look just a little dated by recent standards. Kaname is a particularly distinctive balance of beauty and brassiness, with a highly-expressive face and larger-than-normal mouth for a character like hers, while Tessa cuts a more sleek and sophisticated, but still youthful, look and Melissa Mao looks sexy without sacrificing her convincing aura as a soldier. Sousuke has been accused of strongly resembling Gundam Wing's Heero Yuy but still stands out amongst his male cast mates, all of whom have more original appearances. The series lacks little for background designs and color schemes, either; the dusty desert tones of Helmajistan stand as a sharp contrast to other settings. Minor quality control issues in character and mecha rendering do pop up from time to time if one watches for them carefully, although these flaws are far less egregious than those that would be seen in, say, a typical BONES series. The animation is at its finest in the depiction of Lambda Driver-on-Lambda Driver battles, but compensates for that with shortcuts elsewhere – although admittedly some of those are done for comic effect.

The soundtrack is normally quite effective, with a good mix of comedy, action, and dramatic pieces that includes some vaguely military themes which sound like they may have been inspired by the '80s American TV series The A-Team. Occasionally a stinker works its way in, though, especially in the early episodes. Singer Mikumi Shimokawa contributes both the opening and closing themes, which are used throughout even though their matching visuals update in the late teens (for the worse in the case of the opener, as a toss-up in the case of the closer). Opener "Tomorrow" suits the series very well and would probably fare well in any voting for the best openers of the early 2000s, while more gentle and mellow closer "Karenai Hana" is no slouch, either.

Funimation has retained ADV's original English dub for this release. While the dub may be fairly accused by nitpickers of showing a little weakness in its minor supporting roles, it is also particularly strong in its major roles. Chris Patton once said in a 'con panel discussion that Sousuke was a difficult role for him, but the very distinctive cadence he uses for Sousuke helps give his role an easily distinguishable character and reinforces how out of step with the teenage norm his character is. Lucy Christian also does a great job with Kaname's many moods, while the since-departed Mike Kleinhenz turned in the best work of his career as Commander Kalinin. Mike McRae also turned in a (to date) career-best effort giving Gauron a wicked menace; that may, in fact, be the best performance in either dub. Major supporting performances include Spike Spencer in an especially good fit as the sometimes-whiny, sometimes-psychotic Behemoth pilot featured in the second story arc. The English script doesn't change enough to generate many complaints.

The enduring popularity of the franchise made FMP a natural choice for acquisition and Blu-Ray release by Funimation, but this version is probably not worth an upgrade for any other than videophiles if you already have an earlier release. That the series was first broadcast in early 2002 means that it was not made with film or high def in mind, so the Blu-Ray picture still comes in a 4:3 aspect ratio and the ability to improve the picture quality is limited; the colors in this upscale are definitely brighter in the Blu-Ray version compared to the DVD version, but that's about it. The sound does get a bit of an upgrade but Funimation has also done a better job on other Blu-Ray releases. The third of three disks includes clean opener and closer, TV promos, an interview with the director and original creator, and the full collection of a dozen original Japanese piracy warning clips voiced by various characters from the series, but these were all scattered across the original ADV DVD releases. Absent are the in-character English language piracy warnings and mini-posters with all manner of character and equipment sketches and profiles on their backs, both of which were available with the original singles.

Ultimately FMP is a series that should not be contemplated too deeply, as all sorts of plot holes and logistical improbabilities appear if one delves even slightly beyond the surface and it is woefully short on fleshing out the bigger picture. Fortunately, it is well-suited to being enjoyed on a purely visceral level. Its ability to alternate between high school hijinks, flashy mecha and sub action, more personal battles, and occasional spots of fan service, as well as its entertaining central couple, gives the series a broad appeal and high rewatch value, and its technical merits stand up better than most other TV series of its era. Whether or not the Blu-Ray version is the one to own is debatable, but its worthiness to be owned is not.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : B+
Animation : B+
Art : A-
Music : B+

+ Highly entertaining, good rewatch value, nice blend of genres.
− Not always smooth in transitioning between comedy and serious aspects

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Samurai Champloo (2011-04-27 22:57)

Mugen is a wild, womanizing warrior who believes absolutely in doing his own thing; he is no one's servant or slave and does whatever he wants, and if that happens to mean killing thugs who get in his way, so be it! Jin is a vagrant ronin—formally trained, well-mannered, and highly-skilled, yet just as fiercely independent as Mugen. The two take an instant dislike to each other and set about repeatedly trying to kill each other, efforts interrupted only by running afoul of a local lord. When a ditzy barmaid named Fuu helps rescue them from being executed, they reluctantly agree to set aside their mutual animosity until they have helped her in her quest to find a "samurai who smells of sunflowers." That is, if they don't ditch her first. . .

Review:

If you've ever asked yourself, "gee, I wonder what a hip-hop samurai anime would look like?" then Samurai Champloo is your answer. This gleefully irreverent action series goes all-out to be the hippest and baddest anime title of them all. But what else would one expect from Shinichiro Watanabe, the creative whiz responsible for Cowboy Bebop? The sensibilities of the latter clearly permeate this series, especially in the way the action scenes are staged. Though ostensibly set in the Meiji era (the period in the late 19th century when Japan was modernizing and the old ways of the samurai were being set aside), the series tells you up front that it's making no effort to be historically accurate. In fact, the setting is little more than a convenience to allow for how Mugen and Jin could be wandering the land racking up such a high body count with their swords. Their excesses do, of course, get them into trouble which, at various points, results in them being tortured, almost being executed, having to deal with assassins, and being tormented by an individual whom they harmed (but failed to kill) early on, who seeks revenge. Having to deal with Fuu could be considered another kind of punishment, but her presence does at least somewhat curtail their lethal tendencies.

The greatest beauty of Samurai Champloo is that everything about it contributes to its hipness. Characters are given crisp dialogue heavy on 'tude and ample opportunities both to display that 'tude and show off their skill. Character designs are heavily stylized, stressing thin, gangly limbs and caricaturized

faces, while costuming reflects the time in which the series is set but also incorporates a certain panache. The musical score is composed mostly of energetic hip-hop beats headed by a rapped (in English) opener and an R &B-sounding closer, while discourteous notices pepper the first episode ("This work of fiction is not an accurate historical portrayal. Like we CARE! Now shut up and enjoy the show!"). The animation gives the characters ample opportunities for interesting expressions and poses, and even the MTV-like editing furthers the overall trendiness.

The action, though, is the real highlight. Fight scenes are swiftly-paced, full of motion, and thoroughly dynamic. Each main character has their own highly distinctive way of moving, which is supported by some of the best animation you'll see in any series anime. Characters move around and blend with the backgrounds quite effectively, creating a fully-integrated look which is a pleasure to watch. The only knock I could make against the series on technical merits is that the color schemes are sometimes a little too dark, but that's a minor quibble. This is, overall, one of the best technical series in recent memory.

English vocal casting consists of a collection of Geneon/Pioneer regulars. They do a fine job of capturing the attitude and style of the characters, although their voices don't match terribly well with the originals. The English script does stay tight with the subtitles most of the time, but I noted at least a couple of places where meaning in a scene was changed markedly in the translation ("my whole family will have to commit suicide" is changed to "it will be the death of my whole family," for instance). If you're generally a dub person then you will probably find the dub to your satisfaction, but this isn't a series likely to change the preferences of sub-favoring viewers.

Graphic content for the series so far is pretty strong. Blood, severed body parts, and violent deaths abound, though the series never gets truly gory. A few sexually suggestive bits are peppered throughout this volume but there's no actual fan service. Language can get harsh and crude. This isn't one for the kiddies, but teenagers would probably love it.

DVD extras for the first volume are limited to an assortment of promos, trailers, and teasers, although an interview with the chief writer is included in the liner notes.

The biggest knock that could probably be made against Samurai Champloo is that it lacks more than the barest semblance of an overall plot. The first four episodes are episodic, and while they stand alone quite well, they don't run together to create anything greater. Perhaps that is something to come in future volumes. Overall, though, this is one sharp and exciting series. It's easy to see why it has already made such an impression on the American fan community, and it should continue to do so.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : B
Animation : A
Art : B
Music : A-

+ thrilling action sequences
− sparse DVD extras

Mugen, Jin and Fuu continue their trek through 19th-century Japan in search of the samurai who smells of sunflowers. As always, they're in dire need of money—and when Fuu signs up for a modeling job with an ukiyo-e artist, she unwittingly falls victim to a shady yakuza racket. The three of them narrowly

escape, and then it's off to Edo to win some money in an eating contest, but they get more than they bargained for when a foreigner joins the group. Later on, Fuu has her money stolen by a pickpocket, and her efforts to track him down lead to an unexpected life lesson about parental relationships. Jin, meanwhile, has a run-in with some old acquaintances when a bigheaded swordsman barges through town looking for revenge against "the Samurai with Glasses."

Review:

It may seem at times that Samurai Champloo's popularity is driven more by its own hype than the quality of the series. "From the director of Cowboy Bebop!" they say. "An animation staff that worked on The Animatrix and Kill Bill!" With such a distinguished pedigree, Samurai Champloo doesn't even need to try to earn its fanbase. However, Shinichiro Watanabe would never take the easy way out, and his unique directing style ensures that most of Champloo's praise is well-deserved. Except maybe the part where people start calling it the greatest anime ever. It's not quite there yet.

For months, anime fans have discussed Samurai Champloo's "hip-hop samurai" aesthetic, and now that the argument has been beaten into submission, let's summarize: it works. The idea is more than just urban beats set against historical fight scenes, though; playful anachronisms creep their way into every aspect of this series. Beatboxing samurai? A policeman using a sword as an exercise device? Sure, why not! Add to that a whimsical, unpredictable sense of humor and the result is pure entertainment. What Samurai Champloo lacks, however, is a strong, continuous storyline. Let's face it: the search for the sunflower samurai is just an excuse to send three unlikely folks on an amusing road trip through old-time Japan. Each episode on this disc is a fine blend of action, comedy and drama, but nothing really strings them together except the progression of time. The pacing isn't perfect either—with such slick action scenes, the downtime and dialogue in between can sometimes be a bore.

Despite its flaws in storytelling, Samurai Champloo thrives on an appealing core of characters. With Mugen's rash attitude, Jin's no-nonsense aloofness, and scatterbrained Fuu trying to hold it all together, the trio creates a dynamic relationship just by being there. And while the series has yet to form a solid plotline, there's already character development going on, as Episodes 7 and 8 show. Fuu's conversation with the thief Shinsuke reveals some details about her parents, and the events that follow prove that this show can strike close to the heart. In Episode 8, Jin becomes more than just a tight-lipped wandering samurai when we finally learn why he left his dojo. Stylized swordfights are fun, but personal stories like these give the show a counterweight of believable drama.

The successful melding of hip-hop culture and 19th-century Japan depends a lot on Samurai Champloo's dynamic visual style. The entire look of the show is governed by sharp, spiky lines and an MTV-inspired approach to animation. The artwork isn't afraid to branch out, either—while the most striking scenes appear to have leaped off a particularly good wall of graffiti, there are also homages to traditional art styles of the past. The animation is at its best during action scenes, with jerky in-your-face camera angles, expertly timed motion and (in Mugen's case) the best breakdance moves outside of a club. Less impressive is the plain, unexciting cinematography that dominates when no one's fighting. Countering that, however, are some gorgeously colored backgrounds and an attention to detail that makes Japanese history almost real. Meanwhile, the characters aren't quite as iconic as the cast of Cowboy Bebop, but their outfits and appearances are memorable enough to be cosplay-worthy.

Along with Samurai Champloo's trendy visual style comes a soundtrack that will go down in history as the most unlikely music for a samurai series ever. With a team of true hip-hop artists laying down tracks for the show, the music goes beyond the realms of pop and challenges viewers with snappy beats, forceful dissonances, and harmonies out of jazz and R &B. Although the music is focused on one main genre,

there's enough variety to capture the many moods of the show, whether it be fury, tranquility, sorrow, or just plain silliness.

Geneon brings in the voice talents of Bang Zoom! Entertainment to produce a respectable but not outstanding dub. Mugen, Jin and Fuu all sound well-suited to their personalities, although Daniel Andrews' turn as Mugen could use more bite, and Kari Wahlgren's interpretation of Fuu falls into the habit of sounding like every other ditzy anime girl out there. The secondary characters are a hit-and-miss affair: Episode 6 shines with hilarious performances from the comically-accented Dutchman and the eating contest commentator, but in other episodes, characters like law enforcement officers and older women come off as uninspired clichés. Still, this is one series that can be enjoyed in either language.

Samurai Champloo is a lot like Mugen's fighting style: reckless, daring, and unafraid to try every possible idea to see what sticks. Some of them stick better than others, and through these early episodes, it's a series that's still finding its bearings. What direction will it take next? Hardcore katana duels? Oddball comedy? Somber drama? Wherever Samurai Champloo is headed, it's sure to be interesting, so sign up for this road trip while you've got the chance.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : B
Animation : B+
Art : A-
Music : A-

+ A sharp sense of humor, playful anachronisms, and stylish action scenes.
− Kind of boring when it's not being all hip and snazzy.

Fuu and her samurai companions Mugen and Jin continue their search for the sunflower samurai, all the while trying to find new sources of income. An attempt to cross a heavily guarded military checkpoint turns into a high spiritual experience for everyone; once they get to the next town, Mugen plays cat-and-mouse with a serial killer who relishes the challenge of fighting the top swordsmen in the land. Later on, Jin becomes infatuated with a prostitute who has sold herself to repay her husband's debts, while Mugen tries to strike it rich with beetle sumo wrestling. Are they ever going to get back on track with the sunflower samurai? Maybe the guys will find out more about him when they stumble upon Fuu's secret diary.

Review:

As far as historical anime shows go, few are as entertaining as Samurai Champloo, and that's probably because it generally avoids being historical. Despite its 19th-century trappings, Champloo boasts an eclectic visual style and an anachronistic soundtrack that catapults it into modern-day relevance. This quartet of episodes showcases the wide range of moods and stories that this anime is capable of, all tied together by the search for more money, and the sunflower samurai.

The structure of the series retains its consistency through Volume 3, telling stand-alone stories that are linked by the trio's ongoing journey. The pattern is broken momentarily in Episode 12 for a clip episode that summarizes the series so far. Although it's a fun way of reliving events through Fuu's eyes, it's also a cheap excuse to get out of producing fresh animation and story. The other episodes are more fulfilling: on a single disc we have a perilous caper with an unexpected ending, some classic sword-fighting action, and a strange but touching love story. The telling of these stories is often straightforward, shifting effortlessly

between weighty drama and nimble action, yet the next turn is always an interesting one, just like the series itself.

One particular high point is in Episode 11, where Jin gets involved with a prostitute and gallantly tries to save her from the brothel. For the first time, his character goes beyond that of "the quiet guy" and we see his unwavering sense of justice at work. The ending is particularly moving, showing at once the depth of his heart but also reminding us that he's still just a quiet guy with a sword. Meanwhile, the serious side of Mugen's code of conduct comes to light in the previous episode, but it's not quite as dramatic as what happens to Jin. Through all this, Fuu bounces merrily and nags the other two to make some money; clearly, this isn't her time for character development.

The artwork of Samurai Champloo remains as stylish as ever, combining lush, idyllic landscapes with bold, angular character art. Although overt references to hip-hop culture are put on hold for a while, there's still plenty of room for the animators to have fun, such as in the colorful, tripped-out sequence towards the end of Episode 9. (Anyone who's seen "Mind Game" should recognize the style immediately as that of the movie director Masaaki Yuasa.) A more subtle technique shows up in flashbacks, where sepia tones and grainy effects give the right feeling of age to certain scenes. When bigger jumps in time are required—like the policeman narrator making ridiculous historical tangents—whole shifts in style come into play, making references to ukiyo-e, the Beat generation, and even modern-day Japan. Of course, more conventional animation techniques retain their high standard as well, and there really is no swordfight like a Champloo swordfight. With real-time action, extreme perspectives and angles, and unpredictable moves, this is one truly vivid (if rather stylized) depiction of the samurai era.

The soundtrack remains just as distinctive as the visuals, with hip-hop tracks encompassing a wide range of emotions. Whether it be a single instrument unraveling a melody, or an all-out breakdown on a heavy beat, this is a style of music that's easily as expressive as any full orchestra. Watch out also for the alternate ending song in Episode 12, a soulful ballad whose dramatic weight balances the comedic mood of that episode. Even if it's not everyone's favorite genre, the music suits itself very well to the series, and that's what matters.

Bang Zoom! continues their solid dubbing work on this series, giving Jin, Mugen and Fuu their own unique English-speaking personalities. The one point that could use improvement is putting more energy and emotion into them, as the characters sound surprisingly composed at times compared to their Japanese counterparts. The audio also clips a bit when people are shouting, dampening the effect of the voice actors going all out. The translations aren't totally faithful, but the colloquialisms and phrasing that they use in English often do a fine job of capturing the dialogue's essence. (Interestingly, Mugen swears more often in English than he does in Japanese.)

People often speak of the code of the samurai, but what is it really? Watch Samurai Champloo and you'll learn... nothing of the sort, except for a whole lot of distorted historical information. But what you will learn is a whole lot about human nature, refracted through the unique filter of historical drama and modern urban music. Courage, fear, love, and laughter all play a part in these next few episodes, proving that it isn't just a carefree road trip, but one that can change people for life.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : B-
Animation : A
Art : A

Music : A-

+ Full of emotional depth and striking animation techniques.
− Not as much humor and flat-out creativity as in previous episodes.

Full Metal Panic 2nd Raid (2011-04-28 22:07)

Life isn't easy for teenage soldier Sousuke Sagara, who must split his time between his Mithral assignments as a pilot for the special Arm Slave Arbalest and attending a Japanese high school, where he overzealously continues as the protector for Kaname Chidori. This time a Mithral Intelligence agent named Wraith is covertly backing Sousuke up, but the people who really need protection is everyone else from Sousuke and Sousuke himself against Kaname's discipline for the aggravation he causes. Much more serious threats lurk on other fronts, however, as a madman with great resources seems to have resurrected the Venom armor, proven capable of using its Lambda driver, and now has his sights set on testing Mithral and, most specifically, the Arbalest. At his disposal is a pair of sociopath sisters: one a great pilot, the other a devastating melee combatant, and both quite deadly. But they may have their own agenda.

Review:

The original Full Metal Panic! anime series was a mix of comedy, action, and dramatic elements, while the Fumoffu? follow-up opted instead to focus purely on the comedy elements of the premise. The first volume of The Second Raid takes the opposite approach, instead focusing primarily on the action component and, to a much lesser extent, the drama. With most of the light-hearted content confined to episode 2, it is a decidedly darker and more intense take on the core concept and cast of characters than either of the previous two series. It is also far more graphic, as this one has foul language, actual nudity, and much more intense graphic violence, including one scene (shown twice) where cutting a man's throat is depicted in great detail. The TV-14 rating the volume carries is too low.

Set two months after the original series, the first episode spends its time concentrating on a Mithril strike force extricating itself from a mess in a Third World country embroiled in civil war, one which allows the series to show off its military hardware and emphasis on tactics. The meat of the story follows afterwards and primarily concerns Mithral's growing realization that another independent organization exists which runs counter to their purposes and has its own Black Technology. That such an organization exists shouldn't be any surprise, as it's long been a hard-fast rule in comic books that any organization operating for altruistic reasons must have one or more opposing organizations of approximately equal strength to offer them a suitable challenge. A total madman also usually figures into the equation, and in this TSR is not found lacking.

Much more of an attention-catcher, though, are sexy sisters (twins?) Yu Fang and Yu Lan, who are unemotional to the point of being disturbing; one scene in particular where a gun is stuck in Yu Lan's mouth, and she has a bored expression all throughout the scene, is even a little unnerving. Although Yu Lan also seems capable of producing swords from nowhere, she is most impressive and convincing in the action scenes, where she accomplishes the rare feat of actually being scary with the swiftness, power, and lethality of her moves. Gauron may have been a tough opponent in the first series, but it looks like he has more than worthy replacements here. Their presence, and the substantial screen time afforded Teletha, make up for the shortage of scenes involving Kaname outside of episode 2. Kaname's classmates and put-upon teacher are

also back in limited appearances, and keep an eye out for a very brief cameo by Fuffomu's Ren.

The original FMP was very much a tactics-heavy action-oriented series, but TSR has outdone it both in quality and concentration of caliber action scenes. It seems to revel in its extensive use of military gadgetry, whether it's fantastical equipment like Arm Slaves and helicopters with cloaking devices or more conventional equipment like a gun which can shoot around corners. Since it is set in an alternate modern-day world, it also takes some liberties with politics, such as having a China split north-south by a civil war, much like Korea in our world.

The original series, done by Gonzo, was no slouch artistically or in terms of technical merits, but Kyoto Animation proved able to one-up Gonzo with its beautiful effort on Fumoffu, and they continue by producing equally good-looking artistry and animation here. Character designs do an equally good job at making appealing male and female characters (especially Teletha), technical detail on equipment is exceptional, background art strong, and even the full-CG elements are integrated in reasonably well, but it's the liveliness, scope, and vibrancy of the color and excellent use of animation which really brings this series to life. It also pays great attention to depicting its graphic content and nude scene; although other recent titles are bloodier and showier, it's effective enough. Overall, this is one of the better-looking series this year and one of the best-looking mecha series in many a year.

The musical score also does its job well, whether it's the playful tunes backing the light-hearted scenes in episode 2 or the more tense numbers backing the intense content in other episodes. Some musical pieces are recycled from the previous two series, but others are new. The opener "Southern Wind," although pleasant enough, is more notable for the excellent quality of its visuals, while the closer "I Wanna See You Again" is good and pleasant but not especially memorable.

Although FUNimation licensed and is releasing the title, in an increasingly common move ADV has been contracted to do the production work and English dubbing. The entire original cast has been brought back, ensuring not only continuity in the voice work but consistently excellent dub performances, as its English dubbing has always been one of FMP's greatest strengths. Chris Patton's deadpan performance as Sousuke is still right on the money, as is virtually every other performance by recurring characters. Amongst new roles, John Swasey does a great job capturing the mania of Gates (although he can't sing as well as the original seiyuu), while Christine Auten and Kira Vincent-Davies do acceptably well as Yu Fang and Yu Lan, respectively. Both 2.0 and 5.1 English tracks are available, with the former being the default setting.

Given the popularity of the franchise, it's no surprise that the first DVD has been well-stocked with Extras. Included in the case is some nice interior cover art and a 10-page "Mithral Report" booklet, which includes character profiles, a breakdown of phonetic code, organization details on Mithral, and commentary on the story in general and its source material. It is not the best-written of supplementary booklets, tends to repeat itself, and in places isn't easy to read, but does provide some valuable additional information that has not come up in either previous series, such as the status and whereabouts of Kaname's family and the structure of Mithral.

The on-disc extras are also substantial. They start with Episode 0, a five-minute pure-action piece which also includes a sort of preview of the series. "Dawn of Light Novel" is a 25-minute promo piece which starts out as a look at the Japanese phenomenon of "light novels" and segues into a behind-the-scenes look at TSR's production, which will leave viewers wondering why so much screen time is given to people with bad teeth. The 19-minute "Location Scouting in Hong Kong" and 15-minute "Tour at Japanese Self-Defense Force" are exactly what they say they are, albeit with comical commentary and screen notes. All four episodes also have audio commentary tracks, done in oft-giggly fashion by various groupings of key seiyuu. Rounding out the Extras are the typical clean opener and closer.

The American release of TSR has been highly-anticipated ever since the series started in Japan, and with good reason. Although short on Kaname content, it offers a healthy amount of Teletha content and all the action and military tech one could ask for. Complement that with effective new villains, great art, a solid dub, and a healthy set of extras and you have a must-have volume for anyone who's at least a casual fan of the franchise. The anime adaptation of the fourth volume of FMP's original novel is off to a very strong start.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : B+
Animation : A-
Art : A-
Music : B+

+ Great artistry, animation, and extras, strong English dub.
− One of the original lead characters gets shorted on screen time.

The blame game is in full swing amidst the upper echelons of Mithril over the near-catastrophe that was the Cross-Yangtze River incident, but at least the traitorous Vincent Bruno has been located at an Italian mafia stronghold. Melissa Mao and Kurz Weber are on the job, with Sousuke arriving as back-up to help them out of a difficult spot. The stress of splitting his time between his combat duties and schoolwork is starting to seriously wear on Sousuke, however, and Kaname hasn't failed to notice. Teletha's superiors in Mithril also begin to question the practicality of having a soldier guard Kaname when the covert agent Wraith is already in place, and ultimately pull the plug on his protection mission. Given what he feels in his heart, is this an order that even the diehard soldier Sousuke can obey? And what would the consequences be for Kaname?

Meanwhile, Yu Fan and Yu Lan decide that it's time to split from the mad Gates and his Amalgam organization and pursue their own mission of revenge against Mithril for the harm done to their still-mysterious master. (Oh, like you don't know who it is already. . .)

Review:

Fumoffu? may be the comedic highlight of the Full Metal Panic! franchise, but this volume, spanning episodes 5-7, offers its best dramatic content to date. Prior to this volume the franchise has always not only emphasized its action and comedy more, but been more successful with it. Volume 2 seems at first to continue that trend, as full and satisfying doses of both come up in episode 5 as Sousuke tries to maintain a phone conversation with Kaname in the midst of a madcap car chase/shootout. The cold, efficient, and bloody devastation the Yu sisters can inflict (and the suddenness with which it happens) continues to amaze, Gates has more suitably crazy and perverse moments, and it wouldn't be an FMP volume without a few scenes of Kaname slapping Sousuke around for one reason or another. There's even a tinge of mystery when an unknown AS comes to the aid of Sousuke's team in a timely situation and Teletha's barely-mentioned brother is brought up again.

But this volume truly belongs to its drama. No longer is the franchise using the standard "as long as it's entertaining it doesn't need to make sense" logic to dodge the practical issues surrounding Sousuke

personally protecting Kaname while still going on missions. Mithril has people in its organization suitably trained for such a guard job, and that isn't Sousuke, who has failed to integrate into normal society even after six months of effort and despite Kaname's help. Previously this has been a point ripe for humor, but now the serious side of it shows and delivers a full measure of dramatic intensity.

Equally important is the strength of the character development, which almost entirely (and, in this case, properly) focuses on Sousuke and Kaname. The depth and subtleties of the relationship between the two comes out clearly in the haircut segment in episode 6, where Sousuke's behavior while Kaname cuts his hair, compared to other scenes earlier in the same episode, speaks volumes about the level of comfort and trust between the two. And while Kaname finds Sousuke endlessly disruptive and aggravating, viewers have understood since the early stages of the first series that Kaname not only likes Sousuke but cares for him and, to a certain extent, has come to rely on him for a feeling of security despite her seeming strong-willed independence. The full impact of that comes out beautifully in episode 7, when Kaname seeks out Sousuke in a moment of fear and, for the first time, Sousuke isn't there for her. It's one of those telling moments that can define an entire series.

Good drama requires a high-caliber dub job to be fully effective, but that has never been a problem for FMP and doesn't start being one here. FUNimation's wisdom in farming the dub job back to ADV (who dubbed and released the previous two series) is evident in the terrific performances drawn out of both Chris Patton and Luci Christian in the key roles. Both have to step beyond what was required of them in previous FMP episodes and series, but both rise to the challenge. Supporting roles range from solid to stellar, most notably John Swasey's great work as Gates. A snappy English script, which adds in some slang and profanities but uses the latter very well, is the final piece in a superb dub job, one that, except for a couple of minor roles, surpasses the original. It's one of ADV's better efforts, and sub fans are cheating themselves if they don't at least give it a try.

Nearly as important is the audio backing, which is available on both 2.0 and 5.1 tracks for both English and Japanese. Although it uses some recurring cuts from earlier in this and other FMP series, the soundtrack varies itself by infusing in various spy-related themes, with varying degrees of success. The most notable aspect of the soundtrack is when you don't hear it, however. One long scene in episode 6, and a couple of shorter but critical scenes in episode 7, play out without any musical backing, but the drama of the circumstances is plenty enough to carry the episode and background music at those times would have only been a distraction. The same pleasant but unremarkable opener and closer remain.

The artistry maintains the high quality standards set by previous volumes and series. While not flawless, it invariably looks great, whether one is talking about background art, mecha and equipment designs, or character designs and renderings; highlights include Mao at her sexiest in a slinky dress, Kaname's softer expressions, and how consistently sharp Teletha looks in her uniform and thick hair braid. Fan service this time is limited to a single shot of undergarments which actually doesn't feel much like fan service given the way it's handled, while the most intense graphic content is also limited to one especially bloody sequence. (And it is best not to think about what the scene involving Gates and the video of kittens is implying.) Animation is good enough to make the few action scenes feel exciting but shows slight flaws elsewhere.

Extras on the DVD include Japanese audio commentary for all three episodes, clean opener and closer, and parts 2 and 3 of the annotated Hong Kong Location Scouting feature seen on the first volume. The case offers nice interior cover art and a 20-page second installment of the Mithril Report booklet seen in this first volume. Various individuals, equipment, and machines are profiled here, with some of the profiles containing major spoilers which go beyond the scope of this volume. Although very informative, the tiny text against the gray backgrounds is murderously eye-straining to read and has a bad habit of running together.

The one place where the second volume of TSR goes wrong is in carrying on a conversation between Sousuke and Wraith at least a minute too long, but that is a minor deficiency in what is otherwise an excellent (if too short) volume of anime. Though these episodes don't lack for action or comedy, they also offer great Kaname-Sousuke interaction and high-caliber dramatic content.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : A-
Animation : B+
Art : A-
Music : B

+ Excellent drama and character development, great English dub.
− Liner note booklet is very hard to read, contains unadvertised major spoilers.

Angry about being pulled from his Kaname-protecting duty so he can concentrate only on mastering Arbalest, Sousuke's confrontation with Tessa over it goes even worse than it did with Wraith. He fares little better in his first encounters with Lieutenant Clouseau, his new SRT commander, who seems determined to push him hard. Weighted down by his mixed feelings and inability to get Arbalest's Lambda driver to engage, things come to a head for Sousuke when his unit is sent to deal with an AS on a rampage in Hong Kong, one piloted by Xu Fan as part of the twins' scheme to get revenge on Mithril. Xu Lan, meanwhile, has gone to Japan to seek out Kaname, who, without Sousuke around and with Wraith incapacitated, must conquer her fears and act as needed to survive. In the process she encounters a strange man who claims to be in love with her, one who reminds her greatly of Tessa.

Review:

Volume three proves that volume two was no fluke: when allowed to take itself sufficiently seriously, FMP is capable of some damn fine drama. The introduction of the ball-busting new Lieutenant may be stereotypical, but the examination of the impact their forced spilt has on both Sousuke and Kaname, and the tactical consequences for both, uses the franchise's best writing to date.

Although Tessa finally gets to speak her heart and Lieutenant Clouseau reveals that he isn't a one-note character, FMP has not changed from being the Sousuke and Kaname Show. Instead of spreading itself thin by splitting its focus between the diverging but still connected story threads, each episode focuses solely on one of the main characters, with Sousuke featured in episodes 8 and 10 and Kaname getting full viewer attention in episode 9. Sousuke has always been so single-mindedly devoted and sure of himself that watching him struggle to reconcile his unacknowledged feelings towards Kaname with his duty, and his troubles mastering Arbalest and what his failures mean to his team, is quite fascinating. This is a gradual but full-blown meltdown in action, albeit one of a diametrically contrary nature to Asuka's famous mental collapse in Neon Genesis Evangelion; whereas she projected outward, Sousuke purely internalizes. That's hard to do convincingly in animation, but FMP has accomplished it.

Kaname also shines in her one episode of exposure, as the fearfulness that gripped her at the end of episode 7 carries over into episode 9. Though not directly cognizant of the threat to herself, a "spider sense" kind of reaction to impending danger eventually provokes her to take bold and desperate action. Lacking fancy moves, dramatic combat-application powers, or fancy equipment, Kaname must rely only on her own

cleverness, which makes her action scenes all the more compelling because the danger to her feels so real. Capping the scene's chilling resolution is the much-hinted-at arrival of an important new character and a resolution of sorts between Kaname and Wraith, one which indicates that we have not yet knowingly seen Wraith's true face.

As before, the English dub proves more than up to the task of supporting the writing, especially in the tricky emotional scenes. Hilary Haag sounds a little more credible as Teletha than the too-cutesy performance by seiyuu Yukana, Luci Christian nails Kaname's tearful and fearful moments, and Blake Shepard gives "Mr. Silver" a sly and smooth sound that departs a bit from the original performance, while Lt. Clouseau is delivered in a fashion more befitting an American black military officer, which fits English better than the Japanese approach. In general, tones and inflections are adjusted enough to make the whole thing sound excellent in English. The English script still rewords things substantially, giving the dialogue speech patterns and slang usage more befitting the English language, but it is handled well enough that it is unlikely to bother anyone beyond the most diehard purists. The one flaw which prevents the English dub from being given a higher grade this time: one scene in episode 8, where Sousuke is in his cockpit, has a few lines of dialogue by the A.I. completely eliminated in English, for no apparent good reason.

As with the previous volume, the soundtrack shakes up its musical score quite a bit. Most of the traditional FMP themes have been set inside in favor of entirely new batches tailor-made for each episode, ones which favor a mix of dramatic sci-fi tones and horror themes for episode 9 and more general drama elsewhere. The effectiveness of the new themes is mildly mixed; often they're great, but at times you may be left wondering at the music director's choices. The soundtrack still knows well when to be quiet, too. Also especially noteworthy is the use of sound effects, particularly involving the gun used by Yu Lan. Special effort clearly went into making it sound authentic. Opening and closing themes have not changed, but their lyrics now speak more to what the main characters are going through than before.

FMP series have always looked good, and this volume maintains the franchise's high artistic standards. Well-drawn and interesting-looking characters, sharp (if not entirely original-looking) mecha designs, good backgrounds, and well-handled CG effects are all strengths, and although there's no actual nudity this time, episode 9 provides some quality Kaname-based fan service. Good animation supports effective and exciting action scenes, although this volume has less of such content than the norm for the series.

Once again all three episodes have audio commentaries by pairs of key seiyuu, and parts IV and V of the annotated Hong Kong location scouting seen in earlier volumes are also present. The only other extras are the textless opener and closer. The standard Mithral Report booklet provides a wealth of additional detail on fictional and nonfiction locations, personnel and equipment profiles, and call signs used in the various FMP series. . . if you can read it, that is. The miniscule font size and questionable use of background coloring previously cited as problems are even worse here, often making trying to read the entries an eye-straining experience.

Only three episodes coming out at a time may be a pain, but at least they're quality episodes. Though basically humorless, it is still one of the best FMP volumes to date.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : A
Animation : A-
Art : A-
Music : B+

+ Best dramatic writing yet for the series, great visuals and animation.
− Print in included booklet is hard to read, some lines are absent in the English dub.

As his Mithral companions search out Hong Kong for the rampaging Venom, Sousuke wanders its vacated streets in a daze, the stress of his responsibilities, troubles, and conflicting priorities finally having gotten too much for him. A chance encounter with a working girl helps him sort some things out, and a cryptic message which leads him to meet an old adversary answers further questions but does not ease his troubled mind. With Yu Fang still wreaking havoc and Gates and his strike force also coming into the picture, the AS battle situation in the city has become harrowing indeed. To save everyone and stop the bad guys, Sousuke must come to terms with himself and find his motivation, and Kaname is just the girl to help him do it.

In the bonus OVA episode "A Relatively Leisurely Day in the Life of a Fleet Captain," Tessa encounters the eccentricities of some of her key crew members while trying to piece together just what all happened to her the night before after an unintentional bout of drinking leaves her memory hazy.

Review:

This volume features Sousuke hanging out with a Kaname look-a-like hooker.

If you're a fan of the Full Metal Panic! franchise and that doesn't get you to see this volume, I don't know what will.

Seriously, though, the meltdown by Sousuke that marked the end of the previous volume becomes the focus of this volume as an uncharacteristically directionless Sousuke wanders around the near-deserted Hong Kong trying to sort out where his priorities do (and should) lie. This is not Sousuke as you have seen him at any previous point in any FMP series, as the incident with the prostitute attests. During this time he finally encounters the mysterious Sensei of the twins, and his identity should surprise no one who is a long-time FMP fan. Although the Sensei has a lot of interesting things to say about Sousuke and basic plot elements underlying both the original series and Second Raid, the reaction he gets from Sousuke truly justifies sitting through the comparatively slow-paced episodes 11 and 12. While not necessarily out of character, it is nonetheless a bit shocking.

That leaves only the final regular episode to wrap everything up, and as a result, the climatic mecha battles feels rushed, overly easy, and unimpressive compared to the steady and careful development of the series. Kaname finally shows up in grand fashion, and the manic behavior of Gates again proves to be a highlight, but more interesting is Sousuke's behavior afterwards. The story is not over when the battle is won.

The extra-length bonus episode, by comparison, marks a return to the humorous, free-wheeling style seen in the Fumoffu? episodes. It not only provides the volume with its requisite quota of fan service (Tessa has never looked better!) but reveals highly amusing insight into some important cast members; we get to find out who is a closet otaku, for instance. The cost of the volume is almost worth it for this episode alone.

As ever for the franchise, the sharp, vibrant artistry (even when showing darker-hued scenes) and solid animation provide for a pleasing visual experience. Lamba driver special effects in the climatic battle

scenes are suitably impressive, and the animation adds in some neat tricks if one watches carefully with them. The OVA episode in particular shines in the exaggerated reactions of crew members, Tessa's luxuriously pretty look with her hair down, and a few amusing details that can pass so quickly they can easily be missed if one is not especially alert.

The musical score is at its best in the sillier scenes in the bonus episode, while it disappears for long tracks in episode 11 and 12; such scenes do not require music to set the mood however, so it was a good choice. In places where it is present the soundtrack relies on standard franchise themes, and the opener and closer remain unchanged. The English dub provides no letdown from previous volumes, with the highlight this time being Gates' dialogue involving the twins in the last episode. All the English actors once again prove capable of delivering on the more emotional content, as well as having a bit of fun in the OVA. The English script through these episodes is somewhat flexible but never strays too far.

In addition to the bonus OVA episode, the on-disc Extras include Japanese audio commentary for all three episodes, the last two parts of the Hon Kong Location Scouting documentary, and textless songs. The interior cover sports bonus artwork, while the booklet this time includes profiles and an art gallery for some key characters and equipment and two pages of Story Files. It also, unfortunately, includes the return of the hard-to-read print seen in volume 2.

While the last regular episode does ultimately bring the series to a proper ending, it also leaves some nagging questions unanswered, such as the exact nature of Kaname's Whispered ability. At the time of this writing no word has come about possible further animation for the franchise, but the final episode does leave the window open for that possibility. If this is to be the last animated FMP content, though, then it certainly could have done much worse. This volume may not be as strong in its writing as the previous two, but it is a respectable close-out for the series.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : B+
Animation : A-
Art : A-
Music : B+

\+ Bonus OVA episode.
− Climatic battle feels a bit rushed.

Gankutsuou: The Count of Monte Cristo (2011-04-30 22:10)

Albert, an aristocrat from Paris, finds himself listless and bored with his pampered life, so he and his best friend Franz set out across the galaxy to the Luna, the surface of the moon for a Mardi Gras-like festival. While there, they meet the enigmatic Count of Monte Cristo, who takes an unusual liking to Albert; the two become fast friends. What Albert doesn't realize is the Count's connection to his family, and his real motive: revenge!

Review:

Gankutsuou, the latest effort from legendary director of Blue Submarine No. 6 and the Last Re-

naissance segment from The Animatrix, is without a doubt one of the finest anime series ever made and probably the best thing released this year. As much fun as anime is, there are certain adjectives that you can't really use when describing most of it; classy, dignified, or elegant. Sure, there are a handful of shows that have these traits: Emma, The Rose of Versailles, to name a few. But, neither of those do what Gankutsuou does, which is successfully marry the long-standing anime tradition of being an over-the-top visual spectacle with the respectability and maturity of something you'd see on PBS. People like to say shows like Naruto are "for adults" because there's blood and swearing; Gankutsuou is for adults in the same fashion that films like Elizabeth or The Lion in Winter are for adults. It's a mature story, told in a mature way.

It's an adaptation – well, okay, a reimagining - of Alexander Dumas' classic revenge tale, The Count of Monte Cristo. Characterizations, particularly the Albert and the Count (and his bizarre alter-ego, Gankutsuou) are strong but subtle. We learn about these characters through their actions, not through lame expository dialogue, which is very refreshing. Despite its somewhat dry source material, the show moves along at a surprisingly fast clip; we learn pretty quickly what the Count's true intentions are and the story rapidly becomes pleasantly complicated and yet easy to follow at once. The sheer amount of story in this first volume will have your head spinning… in a good way, of course.

That said, Gankutsuou's story is unlike most other anime, and many fans will either find themselves overwhelmingly fond of it or totally bored; there aren't any giant-breasted girls with too little clothing on, no ninjas to speak of (at least, so far), and Albert isn't on a quest to become the world's number one cockfighting champion or whatever. This isn't something from the pages of Shonen Jump. It's a remarkably sophisticated retelling of a classic novel (a particularly dense one at that), and therefore patience and an appreciation for something a little different is required to truly enjoy the show. That fact doesn't make the show fundamentally better, per say, than your average action anime, but it sure is a refreshing and welcome change of pace from the Gokus and Luffy D. Monkeys of the world.

It's impossible to discuss Gankutsuou without making a huge deal out of the visuals, which are breathtaking to behold. Mahiro Maeda, the show's director, is a fantastic artist and has a remarkable background in fine art, and his penchant for flashy but dignified visuals shines in Gankutsuou more than any of his previous projects. Clothing is rendered as a basic outline of the garment that moves over a static "fabric" background; hair is done in the same fashion, as are many other textures and surfaces in the show. The result will either make you weep tears of joy at how marvelously unique and beautiful it is or it'll make you sort of nauseous and dizzy and maybe your eyes will hurt a little. I found myself firmly in the former camp; what Maeda has created is an absolute feast for the eyes. Fans of art nouveau pioneers like Gustav Klimt will love what they see here.

There are a few hiccups, however; occasionally the technique used can make the scene appear a little too busy or overwhelmed by color, and sometimes the CG scenes of the cities Albert and his aristocratic chums visit look spare and sometimes nearly unfinished. So much effort clearly went into bringing the characters to life that sometimes their environments are peculiarly empty; this is a rare occasion, though, and the artistry on display is so dazzling that it's easy to overlook the occasional mistake.

The music suits the show perfectly, for the most part. The opening is a slow piano ballad sung in English that fits the flowing, nostalgic artwork perfectly (despite the fact that the guy hits what sounds like a sour note right at the top of the song). The closing is a faster-paced guitar piece that centers on the action of the show, creating a nice bookend that showcases the two-headed nature of it all. Background music is flavorful and appropriate; keep an eye out for a handful of famous opera pieces you may recognize from other films.

If there's one thing to complain about in Gankutsuou, it is, sadly, the English dub. No effort was

made to give these obviously European characters distinct accents. They all sound like generic white people, especially Albert, who talks way too slow in many of his scenes. His voice actor is also overacting to the point where he manages to remove the quiet curiosity the Japanese voice actor managed to imbue the character with; to be frank, I'm not sure the English dub staff really knew how to properly handle this show. The Japanese version, on the other hand, is a beautiful piece of work. The Count in particular is at once soothing and menacing, and his French is surprisingly well-spoken at the top of each episode. The English version didn't even bother to record the Count's French lines in French; they just dubbed 'em in English. Frankly, the dub removes a lot of the magic and majesty this show has to offer. Watch it in Japanese for the real experience.

The DVD itself is a nice package, with a surprising number of extras to satiate the hardcore fans. Storyboards, an insightful interview with Maeda himself, the usual textless openings and endings and some comments from the Japanese voice actors, which are absolutely worth seeing if only to hear the Count's voice actor do the voice for us. The real treat here is the show itself, of course, but Geneon has gone out of their way to add a little more, which is always appreciated.

Simply put, Gankutsuou is a very special show that will appeal to anyone with a refined palette and an appreciation for art. Buy it, watch it, love it. You'll find it hard to resist.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : A+
Story : A+
Animation : A+
Art : A
Music : A

+ One of the finest anime series ever made, a refreshing change of pace
− Might not appeal to everyone.

Albert and friends continue their excursion through the extraordinary underground of the Count's Parisian estate, but Maximilian's growing affection for Valentine and his disdain for the lack of love amongst arranged aristocratic marriages leads to conflict. Meanwhile the Count's carefully calculated scheming continues as a trip to the opera stirs up all manner of attention, he moves to involve Baron Danglar's bank in his finances, and he plays up to Heloise, the toxicology-loving wife of Crown Prosecutor Eduoard de Villefort. But his boldest move yet comes at a dinner party at a morose country estate once belonging to Villefort where a little game proves anything but innocent. All the while Albert remains oblivious to the machinations into which he has become an unwitting pawn.

Review:

Has revenge in anime ever been so carefully and deliciously constructed, or looked so good doing it?

In the first volume of Gankutsuou, The Count of Monte Cristo laid the foundation for his grand scheme of revenge by befriending Albert de Morcerf, the son of one of the men against whom he has sworn vengeance, and using that connection to help establish himself in Paris. With the second volume we get to see the first pieces of that scheme come into play. One cannot watch these four episodes without getting a sense of an intricate machine gradually cranking its way towards destruction and doom as the Count makes his sly first plays against the hearts and minds of his enemies. In this the writing has done a great

job of capturing the spirit and character of the original novel by Alexandre Dumas. Most of the thematic elements, characterizations, and relationships have also been preserved despite the futuristic setting; only one of the named characters here – the transvestite Peppo – was not in the original novel. Even the intimations that the Count might be a vampire were actually in the original novel, too, although they are much more pronounced here. The more you know about the original story, the more the cleverness of this writing effort shines through.

Where this story goes beyond the novel is in its use of Albert, originally only a secondary character, as a framing device. By doing this the viewer's perspective is limited to only a little more than what Albert himself knows about the causes for the Count's motivations, which certainly helps maintain the level of suspense for anyone who hasn't read the novel. (And for those who have, the suspense is in seeing how Gonzo's going to handle various story threads.) It also allows the writers to condense down but still examine a very complex theme about relative vs. absolute happiness, which can be seen in the way things play out amongst Albert and his friends. Maximilian's umbrage about the lack of love amongst aristocrats, and the way it makes Albert reexamine his own views and relationships, is a big part of that. The addition of the worldly and streetwise Peppo as the nagging voice in Albert's ear further allows him to reflect on matters that he otherwise would be too naïve to even consider. The affection the Count is starting to feel towards Albert also allows an outlet for condensing down another prominent theme of the novel: alienation, and the way love can overcome it.

The pacing so far has also been handled exceptionally well. By skipping ahead in the story to where the Count meets Albert, hundreds of pages have been eliminated that can easily be summarized in later flashbacks, hence allowing for a much more streamlined story. Enough meaty content fills up every episode that nothing feels like filler, and dark hints of the greater picture are periodically dropped. What happened in that old mansion that has Villefort so horrified? Why is Haydee so slavishly devoted to the Count that she calls herself his "doll," and why does she react the way she does to seeing Albert's father for the first time? These are tantalizing mysteries dropped before the viewer which will doubtless be answered in future episodes. (Or, alternatively, by looking at a Cliff's Notes version of the original novel.)

Ganuktsuou would be well worth watching based on the story alone, but the eye-popping visuals are the true star here. Gonzo Studios has built a reputation for cutting-edge CG visuals in its relatively short existence, but here they have truly outdone themselves, creating some of the most unique and awe-inspiring visuals ever seen in animation. To watch this series with anything less than one's complete and undivided attention is to do it an injustice. The complex, immobile textures of hair and clothing (they don't move as the characters do, like that part of the character is transparent and moving over a background pattern) are a fascinating spectacle in of themselves, but the incredible opulence of the art design and its glorious CG rendering is almost overwhelming in its beauty and detail. Want to see what a genius art director can come up with when practicality and moderation don't figure into the effort? Watch Gankutsuou. Character designs are bland and flat by comparison except for the occasional disarmingly weird-looking alien, but even the human ones are well-proportioned (including the eyes) and appealing or repulsive, as dictated by the status of the character. Vehicles and carriages have distinctively angular, futuristic looks while still retaining much of the essence of 18th century France.

With all this wonder to look at, it's surprising that the piece de resistance in this volume is actually quite easy to pick out: it's the gown worn by Haydee to the opera in episodes 6 and 7. The first look at her in it will make many a viewer's jaw drop, not because it's revealing (it isn't particularly so) but because of an ethereal beauty that only a poet could adequately describe in words and only the finest CG artistry could depict. This is what a true goddess come to Earth would wear to assure mortals of her divine status. That the animation and visual expressiveness of the characters are also quite good are details easily lost amongst the incredible artistry.

The visual splendor also extends to the closer, where dynamic, rapid-fire imagery is paired with the great and very fitting English language rock song "You Won't See Me Coming" to create one of the best closers ever for series anime. The much calmer and more melancholy opener "We Were Lovers" (another very fitting choice, given that Albert's mother Mercedes was the fiancée of the man the Count used to be), also sung in English by Jean-Jacques Burnel, is paired with much simpler animation which gives little hint of what's to come in the episodes. The symphonic musical scoring in between is used sparingly and in an understated manner, more as an enhancement than a feature, but it is very effective in this capacity.

If Gankutsuou has a weakness, it's in its dubs. The Japanese dub is clearly the better-acted of the two, but beyond the Count it suffers some from casting which sounds too distinctly Japanese for the roles of European aristocrats. Though not glaringly obvious, the effect is akin to hearing American actors voice over the roles of Chinese characters in competent dubs of Hong Kong martial arts movies. Arguments about how listening to the Japanese dub still allows a viewer to hear the series "as it was originally intended" don't hold water here since this isn't a Japanese story to begin with. Unfortunately the Bang Zoom! English vocal production, despite respectable casting, is uninspired by comparison. The low point comes in the intros spoken by the Count; why the French used for these in the Japanese dub wasn't retained is beyond me. The English script follows the subtitles closely in some places (usually where the characters can't be seen talking) and is much more interpretive in others, but never stray far from the original meaning. Even so, the sub version, despite its flaws, is recommended on this one.

Extras on this volume include company previews, a promotional trailer set to classical music, and a collection of commentaries by several seiyuu which sounds more like promotional blurbs for the Japanese TV broadcasts. Annoyingly, the subtitles for this extra are only on if the viewer has manually turned them on in the Settings menu. The casing includes a reversible cover and an additional art insert.

The second volume of Gankutsuou is as much a marvel as its first volume, excelling in every aspect of production except its voice acting and blowing a viewer away with its visuals. If the series maintains this level of quality throughout its run then it will take a supreme effort by another title to even challenge it as the premiere anime title of 2006 – and yes, I realize I'm saying that only three weeks into the new year. Gankutsuou is just that good.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A
Story : A
Animation : A
Art : A+
Music : A

+ Awe-inspiring visuals, excellent musical support, great adaptation of the classic original novel.
− Flaws in both dubs.

The Count of Monte Cristo's grand scheme of revenge on the men who once betrayed Edmond Dantes has started to come to fruition, and Albert and his friends are caught in the middle. The first to fall is Villefort, whose inability to prosecute the Count drives him to a dangerous course of action. Next is General Morcerf, Albert's father, whose false identity and past betrayals are laid bare by Haidee during his election campaign. While Baron Danglars is being fattened up for a future fall, Marquis Cavalcanti's designs on his daughter Eugenie force her away from Albert. As everything seems to be collapsing around him, the still-unaware Albert seeks solace in the company of the Count, while Franz investigates deeper into the

identity of Gankutsuou. What he discovers about the Man in the Iron Mask and past connections between Villefort, Danglars, and Morcerf disturbs him greatly.

Review:

With episodes 13-16 many of the truths underlying the Count's plans finally become clear, or at least clearer than they were before. The revelations are unlikely to surprise anyone familiar with the source material, as the major plot points are still more or less the same as in Alexandre Dumas's classic novel, but for newcomers to The Count of Monte Cristo they certainly explain some past events in the series. Haidee finally reveals the reason why she fainted at the sight of General Morcerf at the opera in episode 6 (and gets as much screen time as she did in the prior three volumes combined), for instance, and the past connection between Villefort, Danglars, Morcerf, and Edmond Dantes is further elaborated upon. Hints are thrown out about what, exactly, they did to earn the Count's wrath, and details are also finally revealed about the true identity and nature of Gankutsuou; this is the place where this story diverges from the original novel. The implied truths there are unsettling but hardly unprecedented in anime storytelling.

In general, though, Gankutsuou is a breed apart from other anime series. It isn't just the artistry, either; no other anime series which has made it to the States is written like this one. Its delightfully complex mix of mysteries, intrigues, and manipulations is executed with the kind of dramatic flair one might expect more from a Shakespearean play than an anime series, even one aimed at adult audiences. It's also the kind of writing and characters certain to get a viewer involved. Could one watch this series without sympathizing with Haidee over her background, pitying Eugenie for the way she's being unfairly trapped as a side effect of the Count's plans and Cavalcanti's ambitions, rooting for everything to turn out right for Maximilien and Valentine, or relishing seeing Villefort get what's coming to him? And then there's lovable and pure-hearted but painfully naïve Albert, who's been set up all series for a really nasty fall, the first part of which starts as this volume draws to a close. Is the Count's desire for revenge strong enough that he'll carry it through even at the cost of sacrificing this good and innocent young man to it? Can Haidee discourage him from completing his plan after experiencing the ache left behind by the execution of her own revenge? Only time – and the last two volumes – will tell.

Gankutsuou cannot, of course, be talked about without bringing up its unique artistic style, with its patterns in hair and clothing which remain stationary as the character moves and its incredible use of exceptionally-intricate CG renderings in backgrounds. Viewers who have followed the series to this point have probably become accustomed enough to the distinctive visual gimmicks for them to fade into the background, but the artistry will still occasionally "wow" a viewer with its beauty and novelty, such as the dress that Eugenie wears at her piano recital or the ceiling of the Library. The one flaw is that the character designs that seem crude compared to the fine detail of the CG work and other visual effects, but the rest of the visuals are so extraordinary that it's hard to care. Coupled with great animation, the visuals in this volume continues to show why Gankutsuou is one of the greatest artistic efforts in the history of animation.

Supporting and complementing the great visuals and storytelling is a strong musical score, which occasionally hedges towards melodrama but overall does a superb job. Of particular note on this front are the melodic, simply-animated opener and the rock-themed spectacle that is the wonderful closer. Careful attention should be paid to the lyrics in both, which, it now becomes apparent, were not chosen without specific reason. As the opener and closer frame each episode, so do their lyrics frame the story; the opening lyrics are the prologue, and the closing lyrics are the testament to the Count's current actions and plans.

A great series deserves great voice acting, and the Japanese cast fully delivers despite some minor issues with pronunciations of French names and words. The English voice actors are well-cast for the roles, and some individual performances are the equal of the originals (Abe Vasser does a fine Villefort and Jennifer

Sekiguchi is right on the mark as Haidee), but others fail to fully capture the richness of the originals and the tone of their characters, thus leaving the whole dub one step off the original in quality and effectiveness. This shows most clearly in the introduction of each episode. The English script doesn't stray enough from the original to be the problem, nor is the English dub bad enough to be a detriment to enjoying the series, but the Japanese dub and subtitles are the better viewing option here.

Extras in this volume include company trailers, a full-length AMV for the closer song "You Won't See Me Coming," and a collection of promo spots for episode 14 done by the original seiyuu for some of the key roles.

The time for set-up is over; the end run of the Count's master plan has begun. Some have already fallen, but how many more will be destroyed, whether intentionally or not, before it's done? If you're not watching Gankutsuou then you're missing out on one of the year's best series.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A
Story : A
Animation : A-
Art : A+
Music : A

+ Nearly everything except the English dub.
− The English dub is a step off.

1.4 May

Ghost in the Shell SAC (2011-05-01 22:16)

Major Motoko Kusanagi and Section 9 continue their cybercrime investigations in the age of AI, tackling individual cases while delving further into the mystery of the Laughing Man. Kusanagi pops into a Laughing Man chatroom to see what the Internet is saying about this criminal phenomenon, whether it be rumors or facts. On the stand-alone side of things, a soldier from Batou's military days re-emerges as a serial killer and drags Section 9 into foreign affairs, and then Togusa has an odd encounter as he investigates a database hack at an institution for damaged-cyberbrain patients. The disc closes out with a touching episode about a Tachikoma tank gone loose, who inadvertently finds a cyberbrain containing a filmmaker's last attempt to reach an audience.

Review:

After introducing the world of Ghost in the Shell and setting the plot in motion, the third volume of Stand Alone Complex now goes for some strong emotional hits. Few will forget the chilling "Jungle Cruise" episode, where we learn about Batou's past as a military ranger and watch a murder investigation turn into a personal battle. On the other end of the scale, "Escape From" is a lighthearted departure from the usual tone of the series, but who can resist the charm of a grade-schooler befriending a Tachikoma? And of course, none of this would be a Ghost in the Shell production without excellent animation and music throughout.

At its core, Stand Alone Complex is still just a cop show, but its high-tech setting makes it a cop show where you can't solve mysteries via present-day methods. The series demands a solid understanding of how machines, humans, and the Internet relate in the year 2030, but the results of this intellectual investment are often rewarding. The trickiest part to navigate may be the "Chat! Chat! Chat!" episode, not because of technological jargon, but because it's so heavy on dialogue. Feel free to rewind as needed on this one, because it's one big infodump about the Laughing Man case (and that's why they call it the "complex" part of the series). Luckily, the remaining episodes are all primarily stand-alones, making them easier to follow. This volume is rather light on action sequences—"Jungle Cruise" and "Portraitz" are the only episodes where anyone brings out a gun—but the introspective, laid-back tone makes it even more engaging than a series stuffed with overblown action sequences.

Except for that one formalist experiment ("Let's stick Motoko in a chatroom lol!") on the DVD, each episode features a closer look at one of the characters from Section 9. "Jungle Cruise" is the best of the lot, revealing a darker side to Batou and giving an extra dimension to the gravelly-voiced, wisecracking tough guy. Togusa's undercover work at the institution lets us look at the future through the eyes of Section 9's only flesh-and-blood member, seeing the mind-boggling results of an entire generation that has grown up "wired." Even "Escape From," with a Tachikoma as its main character, achieves emotional weight by introducing a little girl searching for her lost dog. Together they learn about the qualities of humans and machines, and the result is adorable yet profound.

Production I.G's work on the visuals is crisp and fluid as always, with realistic character designs that avoid the "anime style" shortcuts of lesser shows (the best part is that older people actually look like older people). Because this volume is light on action, the animators don't get much of a chance to show off, but they take every opportunity they can—just check out Togusa getting clocked in the head in "Portraitz." Even backgrounds become works of art, as in the visibly cold and clinical hallways of the cyberbrain patients' institution, or the glowingly rendered sunset when Tachikoma and friend get to a hilltop park. Computer effects are also presented with great care—little things like net-diving sequences and monitor displays have a unique, intricate quality that represents the future in a believable way.

Naturally, nothing says "Stand Alone Complex" like the music of Yoko Kanno, and her musical talents continue to be in full force on this volume. A wide range of styles and timbres set the mood from scene to scene, whether it be a pained adagio as Batou chases his quarry or a quirky children's tune as the Tachikoma goes on a joyride. What may disappoint fans is that the music is less intrusive than usual—it's fun to hear those elegant Kanno melodies stand out, but this time she does a fine job of blending it into the anime, which in the end is the true aim of background music.

Also pleasant to the ears is the dub provided by Animaze studios through Bandai and Manga Entertainment. Mary Elizabeth McGlynn continues to play the role of lead character Matoko Kusanagi confidently, while Richard Epcar is in full command of Batou's voice whether he's spouting a one-liner or screaming with rage. Even the one-time characters in "Chat! Chat! Chat!" provide an amusing caricature of what the Internet might sound like. Although the DVD lacks art galleries among the extras (which would probably be awesome to look at), it includes interviews with Akio Otsuka, the Japanese voice actor for Batou, and sound director Kazuhiro Wakabayashi. And of course, the "Tachikoma Days" shorts after each episode are a cute, irreverent counterpoint to the series—even if their sense of humor isn't for everyone.

Badass cyborg women, speculative computer science, and talking tanks might not be for everyone, but if you want to know what quality anime looks like, Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex is a prime example. Volume 3 makes a few narrative missteps, but it still delivers stronger story and more emotional punch than the average anime can in 26 episodes. With the show also currently running on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim block, there are hardly any excuses to miss it. Look to the year 2030 and

make sure to check out one of the best anime titles currently being released.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A
Overall (sub) : A
Story : B+
Animation : A-
Art : A-
Music : A

+ Continues the high standards of the series, with individual characters getting a chance to shine
− Chatroom episode is one big infodump; not a whole lot of action on this disc

The Laughing Man takes a break in this volume as Major Motoko Kusanagi and the technologically elite Section 9 investigate a series of stand-alone incidents in the era of AI and cybernetics. Their first case is a young girl who has become the leader of the terrorist group that kidnapped her, and apparently hasn't aged in sixteen years. Next, Section 9 delves into financial matters as they race to save an eccentric investor whose fortune has become the target of a coin-shooting assassin. Even among their own ranks, however, things are turning worrisome as the Tachikoma tanks have become too smart for their own good. Does Batou have enough heart to let them go back to the lab for repairs? As if that weren't bad enough, he then has to go and investigate a suspected spy that he once idolized as a boxing champ and Olympic silver medalist.

Review:

Well, it had to happen eventually: the fourth volume of Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex isn't quite as stunning as previous installments of the series. While the technical elements like artwork and music continue to stand out, the storytelling takes a dip as the stand-alone episodes go into autopilot. The format of mysteries and twist endings starts to look predictable, and the Tachikoma episode succumbs under the weight of its own soul-searching. Kusanagi's solution for overly talkative, wannabe philosophers? Send them away on a little vacation. Sounds like good advice for Mamoru Oshii as well, if he ever feels like directing another Ghost in the Shell movie.

The main disappointment on this disc is the absence of any episodes relating to the ongoing Laughing Man case. For fans who are following the "complex" part of the series, these self-contained exploits may be less appealing, even though the episodes are satisfying enough on their own. The mystery-solving pattern of each case should be familiar among viewers now, and if you're getting the hang of how things work in the year 2030, the conclusions won't be too surprising. There's a lot of quiet, suspenseful crime-solving to sit through, but those who are patient will be rewarded with thrilling chases, gunfights, and in Episode 16 ("Ag20"), a bareknuckle boxing match featuring Batou. The one exception is the cerebral Episode 15, "Machines Desirantes," where the Tachikomas begin to question their own existence and the relationship between humans and machines. This is as close as it gets to Mamoru Oshii's approach to Ghost in the Shell, so be ready to hit the rewind button and backtrack on the dense dialogue. Incidentally, the Liar's Paradox ("This sentence is false") gets paraphrased in this episode, so logic and philosophy geeks will get a kick out of that.

With the storyline running on autopilot, the principal characters do the same throughout this volume. In Episodes 13 and 14 ("Not Equal" and "YES"), it's the suspects and victims who are the central characters, with Section 9 being the lens through which we view them. Batou is the main focus of "Ag20," but it doesn't develop his character the way "Jungle Cruise" did. In fact, the Tachikomas are the only

characters who really experience a major event, and their little sojourn into philosophy reveals a lot about their "identity," a concept that might seem unusual when applied to machines. Make sure to check out the hilarious scene where they pretend to be "more robotic" so that Motoko will stop looking at them suspiciously.

As always, Production I.G sets a high standard for the visuals in this series. Unlike most animation studios, even their backgrounds catch the eye, particularly in the stark industrial setting of "Not Equal" and the ostentatious mansion that plays host to the final act of "YES." Backgrounds like these create a convincing world that's a lot like our own, but still surreal in its technological splendor. The character designs are as consistent as ever, with a level of detail and anatomy that most other animators would kill for. While some of the basic movements like walking and speaking seem just a little choppy (an effect of digital processing perhaps?), the animation still blows most other anime shows away, especially with the sprightly Tachikomas and the dynamic action scenes. To see the animators really going all out, however, watch the "Tachikoma Days" shorts after each episode, because this is Production I.G just having as much fun as possible, with an offbeat sense of humor to boot.

Yoko Kanno's musical intentions become clearer in these episodes of Stand Alone Complex, as she holds back on her musical explorations and turns to a more unified score. Straight-up rock with an electronic edge sets the tone throughout most of this disc, although other instrumentations and styles are still fair game. At this point in the series, some of the tracks start to repeat too, but Kanno is still the composer of choice for orchestrating the many moods of this show: suspense, conflict, regret, and yes, even comedy.

Bandai and Manga Entertainment's dub of the series continues to be easy on the ears, with characters like Motoko, Batou and Togusa sounding as definitive and consistent as voice actors can be. However, the Tachikomas push the cuteness angle a little too far, and with an entire episode focusing on them, those high, chirpy voices become a real test of endurance. Their highly inflected, energetic way of speaking cleverly illustrates their increase in AI, but it doesn't change the fact that the Tachikomas' voices are really high. If you seriously want to get into their heads, the DVD contains an interview with Tachikoma voice actress Sakiko Tamagawa (yes, she plays all of them), plus an interview with Koichi Yamadera, who plays Togusa.

At its heart, Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex is really just a cop show—but what a fascinating cop show it is. Although there are no new insights on the Laughing Man case, each of these episodes is an exploration into a bewildering world that's supposedly just 25 years away from the present day. At this point in the series, some of the episodes start to have the same structure and feel, but you'll want to watch each one to the end. That's right, even the Tachikoma episode, because despite their smart-alecky attitude, they're really quite endearing. Is the ever-thinning line between human and machine something we ought to worry about? Watch this show and find out.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : B
Animation : B+
Art : A
Music : A-

+ Consistently outstanding artwork and music, no matter what the story's about
− Episodes start to fall into formula, and lack of Laughing Man episodes will disappoint some fans

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RahXephon (2011-05-13 22:53)

The world around Tokyo has disappeared, destroyed by invaders. The citizens of Tokyo have continued living, remembering the history of the world and knowing that someday the invaders will return. When the Invaders finally return, young Kamina Ayato begins to question the people and the existence around him. He is soon confronted by Shitow Haruka, a woman who claims to have the answers he seeks. On the run, Kamina is drawn to a temple where the RahXephon awaits him. He is confronted with the possibility that the world he has known all his life is a lie, and the only connection he has with reality lies with the RahXephon and the secrets that Haruka can tell him. Kamina must now confront the secret of the Mu and what really happened to the rest of the world!

Review:

ADV looks to take the world by storm once again with yet another high-energy, action packed giant robot series. Following in the footsteps of other classic Sci-Fi robot shows, RahXephon shines in its first volume, working to establish the main characters and the overall plot of the series. RahXephon mixes exciting visuals, a strong soundtrack, a vibrant plot line, and interesting characters to produce a series that breaks new ground for an almost stagnant giant robot genre.

RahXephon Orchestration 1: Threshold fits into what has become the norm for most ADV releases. Presented in a standard TV format, the first volume contains the first five episodes for the series. The extras include the standard clean versions of the opening and closing animations, as well as a special Japanese promotional trailer. An image gallery is included, featuring music from the show and a timed slide show. To make the first volume even more special, ADV has produced two versions: the regular DVD version and a Collector's Edition, featuring the first DVD, a nice box that will hold the entire series, and a T-Shirt.

On the animation production side, RahXephon develops its look and feel from the creative minds at BONES. RahXephon's visual style comes across as bright and almost cheerful. Considering the ominous feel of the plot and much of the tone of the first few episodes, this brightness helps keep RahXephon from degenerating into yet another typical giant robot show. The bright designs work from the character designs all the way into the mecha designs. While most of the military machines are very mechanical in practice, the robots strike a balance between near-organic forms and machine elegance. The color scheme chosen for RahXephon seems to pay homage to one of its forebears in the giant robot genre–while still making for a solid original look.

The soundtrack for RahXephon comes in two flavors: 5.1 English and 2.0 Japanese. Both soundtracks feature the same music and sound effect tracks, keeping a consistency between the two. The English track does a good job of keeping up with the original Japanese script, making allowances for lip flaps and some stronger phrasing. ADV has pulled in some familiar names to voice many of the lead characters, such as Chris Patton as Kamina Ayato and Monica Rial as Shitow Haruka. While Chris is in familiar territory with his performance, Monica fits well in a role very different from some of her quieter work as Hyatt in Excel Saga and Karika in Noir. Overall, both casts do a great job of creating characters to which an audience relate easily.

While some will look at RahXephon as yet another "boy finds robot, saves world" type show, it's actually a series that manages to combine a lot of likeable plot points and tries to build an original story for itself. The viewer finds herself on a journey with Kamina as he discovers the world around him isn't what it seems. While most other shows could quickly build into a lot of action, with non-stop robotic fighting, RahXephon continues to build on the mystery it has established in the first two episodes.

RahXephon proves to be a series with a lot going on. On the surface, there are the typical stereotype characters, such as the reluctant teenage hero, the mysterious girl, the boisterous woman and the enigmatic captain. Below that is a back-story that is slowly revealing itself to the audience. All the while, the characters begin to show depth and life to keep the series from degenerating into a simple action/sci-fi adventure. There is quite a bit of action, especially in the first episode, in which most of the actual combat between the giant robots is concluded quickly, often with very little difficulty on the part of the protagonist.

Balanced against this are the simple needs to move the story forward and provide the necessary background information. The audience is clued in to major revelations at the same time Kamina learns about them. Unfortunately, there are a few times during this process that the viewer simply wants to shout, "Get on with it!" While a bit much for the more action-oriented members of the audience, this slower pacing helps develop the personalities of the major players in this series. Much of this character development, especially in the last few episodes of the disc, help bring out the positive side of things, and show that the characters are still human despite the overwhelming odds they face. While there is still much left to be revealed in future episodes, RahXephon so far manages to hold back the dark tones of its driving plot by allowing character development that moves away from a simple degeneration and destruction of personality. There is hope and humor among the main characters, and it doesn't come across as simple fan service.

RahXephon should prove to be a strong title for ADV. While a bit slow, the first release does help show off an exciting array of visuals and a well thought-out plot. While not exactly a strong balance, the action sequences and plot development work together to create a solid and consistent storyline filled with character development. Action fans may want more mecha action, but believable characters help establish the credibility of a good story. Orchestration 1: Threshold will do a good job of drawing in an audience and leaving them clamoring for more.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A
Overall (sub) : A
Story : A
Animation : A
Art : A
Music : A

+ Strong visuals and a deep plot leave much of the audience clamoring for more
− Slow pacing and few revelations may leave some of the audience feeling out of the loop

Ayato finally sucks it up and pilots the RahXephon against the ever-growing forces of Mu. Terra struggles to keep the RahXephon a secret from the public at large, sending it out against some of the strangest new Dolem yet. Quon makes a few bizarre passes at Ayato, but the girl's puzzling speech patterns continue to leave him confused as to her true intentions. A visit to a shrine traps Ayato and Quon inside for days, and Mishima Reika reappears in Quon's vision, calling herself Ixtli and naming Quon an "Instrumentalist," one who will tune the world with music.

Review:

There's a whole genre of shows that advertise giant robot action and yet feature very little of it, focusing instead on mystery, intrigue, and character development. For the many anime fans who don't necessarily appreciate 26 episodes worth of robots beating the hell out of each other, these series tend to be a breath of fresh air (not to mention wild popularity, since they cross genres fairly well and appeal to mecha

fans and non-mecha fans alike.) The most notable example of this genre would be the irrepressible Neon Genesis Evangelion, which featured giant robots but was really about sad people in a desperate circumstance and the clandestine, archaic functions that spelled out the end of their world. Now comes RahXephon, a series that builds on the Evangelion formula and aims to improve it. The second volume of the series makes it clear that this show could very easily eclipse Anno Hideaki's masterwork.

The storyline in RahXephon is, by far, the most intriguing part of the show, and while the first disc took a little time building things up and developing the main characters, the second disc gets right to the meat of the situation and starts to fully explore the myriad mysteries that surround Ayato Kamina and his robotic relic. The ads may show RahXephon in action, shooting yellow beams of light through some stone-faced monster in the sky, but the show doesn't linger on these scenes. Instead, we are treated to some of the most elegant character development ever written for the anime form. Here we have subtlety, slow growth, maturation, and ruminations on the nature of the human heart that surpass anything else in this genre. The characters are not stereotypes. Ayato resists piloting the RahXephon at first, but since his character is written with a realistic growth arc, he realizes his folly and decides to do the best he can when the situation is adequately explained to him. Even the hot-tempered butt-kicking Haruka is shown to be a multi-faceted character and is showcased in these episodes as a thoughtful, introspective woman with serious concerns. The most shocking revelation is that even the character seemingly designed only for fanservice–the large-chested Sayoko–is developed just as much as the other characters. Sure, she appears in a bikini later on the disc, but the screenwriters gift the audience with a few crucial scenes involving Sayoko and her relationship to the Earth Federation observer Makoto later in the episode, as if to apologize for the obligatory fan service. It's responsible writing that should be lauded for its brazen respect for the audience's intelligence.

Furthermore, the mysteries in the show are unveiled and explained at a reasonable pace. Where Evangelion threw out conundrum after conundrum and seemed to never fully explain anything, RahXephon seems to be a painstakingly planned affair. Each episode reveals a little bit more of the larger picture while obscuring pieces necessary to solve the show's riddles. Most of the mysteries are revealed through dream sequences, which provide some amazing imagery. The viewer isn't left totally in the dark, either; after each episode you'll have a better idea of what's happening but still be craving answers to the larger picture. RahXephon does not insult its audience by revealing nothing. Instead, it progresses along a carefully planned track, giving out just enough to keep the viewer as informed as they need to be.

Visually, RahXephon is a masterpiece. The character designs are lovely, the costuming (with the exception of Quon's silly hat) is above reproach, and there are moments of visual clarity and beauty that rival even the highest budget anime films. Ayato's dreams in particular are beautifully rendered. The music follows suit; simplistic and minimalist in most regards, the aural tone of the show adds another layer of atmosphere and mystery to the proceedings. The opening theme by Yoko Kanno certainly helps to bolster the overall quality of the soundtrack, but the instrumental composition is understated, pleasant, and entirely appropriate.

The dub track is your average mixed bag, although this one leans heavily towards the side of almost great. The female cast is, for once, excellent. In particular, Haruka's voice, performed with finesse by Monica Rial, manages to capture the many different emotions that the character displays. Sayoko is also impressive, avoiding the "dumb girl" voice from which the character could have suffered. The one major weakness is Ayato, who sounds a little more emotional and a little less strong-willed than he does in the Japanese version. He almost sounds like the English voice for Rurouni Kenshin, or even Tenchi Masaki. The result is almost the opposite of the introverted Japanese voice, which belies an inner strength despite being nearly monotone in performance. RahXephon boasts one of the best dubs ADV has produced in many years, and while it's hard to recommend it over the Japanese track since a series this complicated requires voice

acting that truly captures the many layers of subtle meaning inherent in the dialogue, it certainly is worth a listen.

Overall, it's hard to think of a smarter show on the market today. RahXephon is proving to be a marquee release for 2003, and while the fervor surrounding it doesn't even come close to matching that which surrounded its closest cousin, Evangelion, the show's maturity suggests that a similar amount of fan excitement would tarnish the dignified and cerebral proceedings that the show has to offer. Here we have animation truly for adults. Don't miss it.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A
Overall (sub) : A+
Story : A+
Animation : A+
Art : A+
Music : A+

+ Excellent story, mature development, nigh-perfect screenwriting
− A little fanservicey, Ayato's dub voice is pretty lame.

Top 25 anime films (2011-05-17 23:18)

25. Steamboy
24. Panda Kopanda
23. Blood The last Vampire
22. Akira
21. The end of Evangelion
20. Paprika
19. Porco Rosso
18. The Castle of Cagliostro
17. Perfect Blue
16. 5 centimeters per second
15. Grave of the fireflies
14. Fullmetal Alchemist: The Movie – Conqueror of Shamballa
13. Piano No Mori
12. Cowboy Bebop – The Movie
11. Tekkon Kinkreet
10. The Cat Returns
9. The Girl who leapt through time
8. Whisper of the Heart
7. Kiki's Delivery Service
6. Castle in the Sky
5. Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind
4. Howl's Moving Castle
3. My neighbor Totoro
2. Princess Mononoke
1. Spirited Away

1.5 June

Gungrave (2011-06-04 22:28)

Brandon Heat is a man unlike all other men: he shoots his guns cross-handed. More importantly, he's been resurrected from the dead and is now known as Grave–short for Beyond the Grave. Under the watch of a scientist and a young girl, Grave wanders around his deserted hometown recollecting his memories and preparing for a mission of revenge against the friend who turned on him. His back story is long enough that the next few episodes cover just the first stage of Brandon's past. In the flashbacks, Brandon runs with a gang of street punks whose rivalry with another gang escalates into a battle for their lives when mobster "Mad Dog" Ladd steps into the fray. Guns are fired, lives are lost, and soon it's just Brandon and his best friend Harry MacDowel fending for themselves on the city streets. With nowhere else to go, Harry decides to join Millennion, the crime syndicate that killed Ladd. Brandon decides to come along, but inside he's wondering if they've made the right choice.

Review:

Ah, the power of celebrity. When you're Yasuhiro Nightow ("the creator of Trigun," as the press kits have reminded us many times), it doesn't take much effort to get the best in the anime business to produce your next creation. With animation from MADHOUSE and a lush background music score, Gungrave Vol. 1 gets the externals right, but it's still trying to find a story.

Some people will watch the first episode of Gungrave and see plotless, bullet-ridden drivel–and they're absolutely right. Grave is only interesting when he's shooting up monsters, and even then, the only thing that sets him apart from any other silent, coat-and-hat-costumed badass is that he fires his guns cross-handed. It's fortunate for us, then, that the next three episodes are an extended flashback that carries more dramatic momentum. However, because of the way the pacing works, most of this momentum comes from wanting to know what led up to Grave's circumstances. When do Brandon and Harry cease being friends? How does Brandon die? With the slow story development, there's only time to watch the first push that propels Brandon into the criminal underworld. Next thing you know, you're at the end of the DVD. The common device of giving a key endpoint first and then working your way there from the beginning might be the only thing keeping people interested in these early episodes.

Despite him being the central character of Gungrave, it's hard to take an interest in Brandon. He says so little that what we know of him is based on how he responds to his friends and foes. Still, we get a sympathetic picture of the hero: someone who's deeply loyal to his friends, and a victim of circumstances he didn't create. Most of the other characters in Gungrave are, like Brandon, thugs who let their guns do the talking. With such a monotonous cast, it's remarkable how easy it is to tell them apart–but that's due more to the varied character designs than individual personalities. Everyone tends to talk the same way and wear the same pained expressions on their faces, no matter what their role in this street drama.

Yasuhiro Nightow deserves plenty of credit for populating the stark world of Gungrave with distinctive-looking characters. Studio MADHOUSE renders these characters cleanly and precisely, while turning down their color palette a few notches to make things appropriately grim. The backgrounds, set in a poverty-stricken coastal town, perfectly complement the mood of the show. What may surprise viewers the most, however, is the quality of the animation. Because the TV release of Gungrave looked so choppy, the animation was touched up for the DVD release and the results here are fluid enough for discerning eyes.

The English dub of Gungrave succeeds through its subtlety. The voice actors, most of them male, have the relatively simple job of sounding tough and serious. There's no need for vocal acrobatics, so none

are applied. Brandon has the tone of an inquisitive young man, while Harry sounds more experienced and gung-ho, as befits their personalities. What detracts from the dub, however, is the freewheeling tendencies of the English-language adaptation. Some of the revised phrases do sound more natural than the direct translation, but changes lines from "it's business as usual for such things to happen" into "things happen, and sudden death is just a fact of life" seem like a lot of unnecessary churning. In trying to make the world of Gungrave sound hard-boiled, the dub script takes more liberties than it really needs to.

The one aspect of Gungrave that's beyond reproach is the excellent background music. Drawing from a wide range of 20th-century styles, the music is at turns brutal, languid, tender, and all shades of emotion in between. This soundtrack sets all the right moods for each scene, and the sophisticated theme songs lead in and out of each episode wonderfully. If the other elements of Gungrave were as solid as the music, it would be a near-flawless series.

With its slick visual style and a music score to match, Gungrave looks and sounds like it has potential to be a great crime drama. The way things are going, however, it'll be a slow ride, and Brandon could definitely stand to be a bit more talkative. If Gungrave is to remain interesting throughout the show's run, the story needs to move along faster than it's been doing so far.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : C
Animation : A-
Art : A-
Music : A

+ Top-notch music, and solid visuals as can be expected from Madhouse
− Needs to develop more story in the next few episodes

After leaving their street gang life behind, Brandon Heat and Harry MacDowel have now joined the crime organization Millennion and start off with thankless, low-level jobs. Four months later, Brandon uses Harry's connections to search for his girlfriend Maria, not realizing that Maria has even higher connections with Millennion. Soon enough he finds himself socializing with Big Daddy, the mastermind of the entire organization. Five years pass, and Brandon becomes "The Sweeper," a gun-wielding enforcer, while Harry takes care of logistics with his cutthroat business attitude. When they get invited into the Family, Millennion's elite circle, they know they've "made it," but at what price? The dealings of a couple of Millennion veterans show the young men just how much loyalty is involved when it comes to organized crime.

Review:

The first volume of Gungrave was like the slow, introductory three minutes of a Beethoven symphony: fragments and snippets that hint at something greater, but not a complete work in itself. When the full melody comes thundering in, the fragments fall into place, and that's exactly what happens in the second volume of this series. The sketchy origins of Brandon Heat and Harry MacDowel evolve into fully detailed accounts of their rise to power, laid out in a set of four satisfying episodes.

Gungrave DVD 1 ended with a feeling of incompleteness. We knew that Grave was a present-day resurrection of Brandon Heat, and going into an extended flashback from there, we saw how young Brandon and Harry found their way out of petty gang wars by joining Millennion. A promising start, perhaps, but would it fulfill its potential? The second DVD succeeds in that respect, showing how the characters develop

in a classic rags-to-riches story arc. There's nothing particularly surprising about the chain of events, but like the first disc, the appeal of the story is in watching the characters' advancement, rather than waiting for twists and revelations. Episodes 5 through 8 avoid unnecessary plot complications and focus on Brandon and Harry earning their positions of respect in the organization. Striking a balance between tense conversations and heated gunfights, it's a storyline that grabs the viewer without having to resort to shock tactics.

Brandon's climb up the Millennion ladder is a fascinating character study, despite his continuing lack of dialogue. His quiet nature, once an annoying quirk, is now the defining mark of a merciless agent who can pop out the double handguns and mop up an entire room of thugs–hence the name, "The Sweeper." Yet he also has a deeply human side–Brandon still cares about Maria, and his loyalty to Millennion is guided by strong beliefs about protecting others and a friendship with Harry that makes them practically brothers.

Studio Madhouse continues to contribute striking visuals to the world of Gungrave. The subtle changes in character design after the five-year jump are enough to suggest a genuine change in Brandon and Harry. Brandon's new duds are a nice step up from the ratty brown shirt (and a possible foreshadowing of things to come), while Harry is stylish as ever in his Yakuza-influenced white suit. Millennion operates in a city that's bigger and more prosperous than the slums of the first few episodes, and this is reflected appropriately in the bigger buildings and cleaner streets. Sadly, the new setting feels more generic than the run-down town where Brandon and Harry used to live. What will really impress the eyes, however, is the slick animation of the gunfights. Madhouse isn't afraid to exaggerate perspective to make a pointed gun look more threatening, sometimes even using a "fish-eye lens" style when appropriate. If pumping bullets into unsuspecting victims could ever be described as lyrical, it's here. On the other hand, so much work goes into animating the action scenes that conversations and other static scenes look half-hearted by comparison, and that's the one real shortcoming in the art and animation department.

The dub script of Gungrave, which took too many liberties in the first volume, reins itself in and comes closer to the direct translation in these next four episodes. There are still plenty of variations in the structure and word choice, but where it felt like unnecessary churning in the first volume, this time the vocabulary accurately reflects the hard-edged conversational style of mobsters. The voice actors continue to sound like tough, serious men, a fairly easy task; this is one of the few cases where it actually makes sense to favor the dub over the sub because of cultural context. Brandon, Harry and the rest of the gang operate in a vague approximation of America or Europe, suggesting that they would be much more likely to speak English rather than Japanese. That's something to think about when choosing the audio for this series.

The music, as before, is faultless–everything from spiky string melodies to mellow lo-fi rock beats accentuate the story, and Tsuneo Imahori's compositional arsenal is to be feared just as much as Brandon's double handguns. Appropriately enough, there's even a melody line that pays homage to the theme from The Godfather, the quintessential mob drama and certainly an influence on Gungrave.

The first volume of Gungrave pointed to the possibility of better things to come, but it suffered from flaws like a sluggish pace trying to compensate for the lack of story and a seemingly boring main character in Brandon. This volume, however, makes up for that by presenting a graceful story arc that shows a talented yet quiet man rising to the top ranks of a crime syndicate. A commonly told story, perhaps, but it's one that looks and sounds terrific in this particular guise.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : B+
Animation : B

Art : A
Music : A

+ Balanced storytelling and concrete characters make this an absorbing drama
− Animation cuts corners more than it ought to

Haibane Renmei **(2011-06-08 22:30)**

In a mysterious land where nobody remembers his or her previous life, strange creatures called Ash-Wings (humans with halos and little flightless wings) are born in an abandoned school on the outskirts of a town blocked off by a wall. These Ash-Wings have formed a society and live in harmony with the people of the town, doing their daily tasks and coping with the unfortunate position of being outsiders. When one such Ash-Wing named Rekka is born, things start changing. Rekka deals with her strange new surroundings, and the Ash-Wings deal with Rekka.

Review:

You know how when you go to the grocery store and you need orange liqueur, and they have both Grand Marinier, for 24.99 a bottle, and the generic grocery store brand, Triple Sec, for 4.99? See, if you're just using it to cook (many fine berry-related desserts require a few tablespoons of orange liqueur), you may as well just get the generic brand and save yourself twenty dollars. If it's the flavor you're after, and you're a person of discerning taste, then there's no question; you want the Grand Marinier. For the purposes of this introductory paragraph, let's say that something like Ai Yori Aoshi is to the anime world what the generic Triple Sec is to the world of orange liqueur. It gets the job done, but it isn't especially pretty, or refined, or special. It's something you'd use when you need a quick fix. Pioneer's release of Haibane Renmei is the Grand Marinier; it's a refined taste, classy, and certainly not for everyone. What we have here is a truly mysterious, charming, enchanting and altogether high quality anime series. It's also one of the most original productions in recent memory.

Haibane Renmei is based on a doujinshi by Yoshitoshi ABe, an extremely popular anime auteur; his worlds are abstract and unique. Haibane Renmei is no exception, and is probably the best of Abe's work. The show is, no doubt, full of mystery. There are big questions to be answered and the relatively slow pacing of the show can become maddening when the viewer is wanting only answers, but the show makes you wait. There is no instant payoff in Haibane Renmei; you are forced to watch the story unravel piece by piece. It's a highly mature and well-developed bit of screenwriting, and should be appreciated by adults everywhere. Folks looking for a more traditional anime would do well to look elsewhere; there is almost nothing traditional about Haibane Renmei.

Starting with the character designs for the show, this entire production is unique. Abe's character designs became famous and incredibly popular with his first big production, Serial Experiments Lain. Here, his technique is a bit more refined; In Lain, the title character was the only one designed to look interesting at all. While this was probably done on purpose to alienate her from her surroundings, in Haibane Renmei, Abe designs the adults with just as much flavor as he does the children. All of the characters in Haibane Renmei are unique and fun, and each bring something to the table. The backgrounds, painted in subtle earthtones, are beautiful paintings that truly complement the look of the series. This is as close to the original doujinshi as they could possibly get, and it's truly a sight to behold. Aside from a few moments of awkward

animation and digital panning, the production values here are good enough. The overtly iconoclastic aesthetic of the series does a good job covering up any shortfalls in the production budget. Make no mistake, Haibane Renmei is a totally mellow affair. There isn't much excitement to be had, but there's more to entertainment sometimes than just bombast and showboating.

That said, this series is certainly not for everyone. Every time a question is answered, another ten questions pop up, and none of those are answered until all of the old ones have been explained. It can be obnoxious at times, but the show rewards those with patience. This first DVD has very few answers in it. You'll find out a lot about Rakka's new world and the traditions and customs behind the Haibane and their interaction with the world around them, but the bigger picture remains totally obscured. If you're not into that sort of thing, skip this series. You need to be patient; viewers who find the show's visual flair particularly appealing will have the most fun with the show, since they spend a lot of time showing the Haibane going through their daily routines. At times it gets a little too quaint (how many times do we need to see them sipping tea from little coquettish teacups?), but the overall effect is calming and mellow, and yet still captivatingly mysterious.

The dub is a marvel. I was honestly expecting the absolute worst from this. The cast for this show is almost entirely female, and nine times out of ten, English-language 'anime girl' voices are completely generic and poorly acted. This time, the age-old rule is broken; the voice cast for Haibane Renmei is excellent. All of the voices are distinctive. This show absolutely required believable, laid-back voice acting; I am extremely pleased to say that not a single voice (with the exception of some poor acting and line delivery on a few of the children, and a couple of clumsy line readings by a smattering of the main cast) missteps. Reki, the Haibane's surrogate mother figure, is voiced with serious skill. Her line delivery is note-perfect and natural sounding. Kuu, who was perhaps the biggest candidate for a screw-up of Utena-like proportions, sounds natural and not forced, which is a miracle considering the character's overly enthusiastic personality. Most impressive is the voice for Kana, which has just exactly the right mix of spunk and tomboy. It's one of those rare cases when the English voice is absolutely dead-on, an equal match for the Japanese voice. Dub fans will find a lot to love about this dub, and those who find English voice tracks to be a grating annoyance might begrudgingly find themselves, for once, agreeing that perhaps dubs aren't so bad after all.

This DVD also comes with a beautiful pencil board, and if you get the version with the box (which happens to be one of the most tastefully-designed boxes on the market right now), you get an extra pencil board with some fantastic artwork and an indispensable full-color booklet with a complete character guide. Pioneer really went all-out to make this 'special edition' special, so if you plan on buying the whole series, don't skimp on the box version.

If you're an adult (or perhaps a mature teenager) with discerning taste, you're going to like Haibane Renmei. This show has class and style, and is one of the most unique releases of the year. Yoshitoshi ABe does not disappoint; he continues to bring new concepts to the table, and so far, they have been executed flawlessly. Don't miss it.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A+
Overall (sub) : A+
Story : A+
Animation : A-
Art : A+
Music : A+

+ Beautiful, engaging, haunting and unique
− Slow pace and confusing story may turn off some viewers

Last Exile (2011-06-10 22:34)

Claus and Lavi have made an easy life for themselves using the one thing their fathers left them, an old rundown vanship. With the love of flight in mind, they take various missions as couriers to make their way in the world. Little do they realize how much their world is about to change when a chance encounter with the legendary Silvana opens the door to a life they never could have imagined. Now, with a mysterious young girl dropped in their laps, they must make their way to that legendary battleship!

Review:

Celebrating ten years of excellence, GONZO has created another masterpiece that utilizies all of their experience to once again break new ground. Last Exile, a full length TV series, comes to life with obvious inspiration in some classic science fiction. Doing what GONZO does best, Last Exile is filled with breathtaking scenery, non-stop action and intriguing characters that will keep even the most casual anime fans glued to the edge of their seats.

Geneon (formarly Pioneer) gives this particular tenth anniversary series the star treatment. The first DVD is packed with content, starting with the first four episodes of the series presented in anamorphic widescreen. The standalone DVD also comes with textless opening, the original Japanese opening, a promotional trailer, a staff interview with Mahiro Maeda (one of the animation character and production designers) and an art gallery. For that extra special treatment, fans can also pick up the special box set version which comes with a beautiful box to hold the entire series, a mouse pad and a figurine of one of the central characters. Topping it all off is a special chromatic coating to give the DVD that special feel that a fine series like Last Exile deserves.

While GONZO is known more for their integration of CGI into regular animation, they've also made quite a name for themselves with some unique tales. Of course, with Last Exile, you are drawn to the vivid world GONZO paints first. The world of Last Exile looks like it stepped right out of a Michael Moorcock Eternal Champion novel. Much like the Nomad of Time, the characters wander around a world filled with mighty airships dealing with the troubles of a world still bogged down with a dramatic difference between noblemen and the common people. Continuing the contrast amongst the characters is the costuming that is very European in feel. Daring to push the limits of their experience, GONZO continues to integrate CGI vessels and settings in with their regular animation. With careful observation, it's easy to spot the two different formats, but their integration together is very smooth. Dealing with more real world constraints, GONZO manages to sneak in these beautiful effects for spectacular results.

Not to be outdone by the spectacular visuals, the soundtrack also contributes its fair share to the unique flavor of Last Exile. Sticking with the European theme, the majority of the music sounds fresh from the European continent. Relying on simple folklore'esque themes, the music builds with the action on the screen, helping to accentuate the story. While emphasis is on the old world feel, the music still manages to to reflect a more modern sound. Working well within the boundaries of the music score are the two casts; English and Japanese. The English side of things is being handled by the folks of Bang Zoom, with Eric Sherman directing. With a strong range of characters, it's not surprising that some of the better known names of the California voice-acting scene are present for this track. Taking on the lead roles are Johnny Yong Bosch as Claus and Kari Wahlgren as Lavi. Handling the role of the enigmatic Alex Row is Crispin Freeman. Michelle Ruff handles double duty as Alvis and Tatiana Wilsa. With only four episodes on this disc, each actor is slowly getting into their character. Last Exile is a tale with many twists and turns, and

this experienced cast should excel in its delivery, despite the challenges that teh series will present.

Last Exile seems to borrow from the best of classic literature. Many of its core elements can be seen in some of the best of classic and modern science fiction. Not resting solely on this foundation, Last Exile begins to weave a strong tale that leaves viewers waiting in anticipation for each episode. Viewers are presented with a strong cast of characters and plenty of mystery leading to a nice mix of suspense. Unlike many of their earlier works, GONZO has spent a lot of time developing the world of Last Exile and has created a wonderful script to move things along.

As is typical for most series, these early episodes serve as an introduction to the main characters of the story. Viewers are teased with Silvana and its enigmatic captain, and then are seemingly thrown to a completely different story featuring Claus and Lavi. Starting from these two very different viewpoints goes a long way towards explaining the world these characters inhabit and how different the world is for the aristocracy and the common people. All of this build up creates a story with plenty of depth to spare.

Last Exile is a beautiful adventure waiting to be explored. Its lavish scenery, dramatic settings and intricate aerial designs are simply the icing on the cake of the solid story that lies at its core. Those who have been looking for something different than the average sci-fi tale can find a whole new world to explore in Last Exile. While the main plot is only being hinted at, the stories presented in these early episodes are more than enough to entertain the masses. With its stunning animation and artwork and a steller cast at the helm, Last Exile is a must-have for all anime fans.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A
Overall (sub) : A
Story : A
Animation : A
Art : A
Music : A

+ A visual masterpiece with the story to back it up
− Slow main plot development, with an emphasis on the main characters

After a successful deliver of their passenger to the Silvana, Claus and Lavi are worried about their new young friend. Shocked at Alex Row's acceptance of the "cargo", the two young flyers chase after the Silvana. Once on board, they encounter the crew of the Silvana and confront Alex Row. Before things can be settled, the Silvana comes under attack. The Guild, the mysterious power that enforces the law of the land, has set their eyes on Alex Row and his crew. Before they know it, Claus and Lavi are in the midst of the battle, fighting for their lives. The tempo of the battle changes swiftly for Claus, when his flying skills draw the attention of Dio Eraclea of the Guild. Will Claus and Lavi survive their first experience of aerial combat?

Review:

The second volume of Last Exile doesn't fail to please, maintaining the series' lush imagery and complicated, engrossing storyContinuing to follow Lavi and Claus, the next few episodes introduce many of the remaining players in this large and intricate work. The production values across all the episodes remain high as the animation, artwork and sound all work together to create one of the best looking series to come out of Japan in a while. Last Exile continues to shine as a TV series that has the production values of a theatrical animated film.

Volume 2 contains the next four episodes of the series and the standard amount of extras for a Geneon release. The basic features include Dolby Digital 2.0 versions of the English and Japanese soundtrack, an anamorphic widescreen presentation, English subtitles and scene access. The extras include the textless version of the ending, the original Japanese ending, a collection of commercials, an art gallery and the standard array of Geneon previews. While these are all solid features, the real treat on this DVD are the episodes themselves.

Last Exile features some of the best animation from one of the hottest studios in Japan. Gonzo put a lot of time and effort into the creation of this series, and unlike some of their previous work, the animation and artwork stays top-notch even through some of the slower parts in these episodes. With a television series, it's not unusual for a studio to dump too much money in to the first episode, and then skimp a bit in the next few. With Last Exile, Gonzo kept the bar high, making each episode more intricate than the last.

In both the English and Japanese soundtracks, each cast has adjusted well to their characters; their performances evolve as the series continues. Making his appearance in the first episode of volume 2 is Joshua Seth, who portrays Dio. While a bit less ambiguous than his Japanese counterpart (in Japan, the voice of Dio is voiced by a woman) Dio comes across as playful and slightly menacing.

Last Exile is an epic series. While the full story hasn't surfaced, the majority of the players have been introduced by this volume. While the story seems focused on a young hero, there's more going on in the background. As the story unfolds, more characters are being introduced that help drive the main plot. While the action and story are easy enough to follow for a casual viewer, the more astute viewer can see the plot beginning to build with these four episodes. Character growth is an important part of a story, and Claus and Lavi face some strong challenges as they are thrust into the dangerous world of the Silvana. The plot thickens at a breakneck pace in these episodes; you may want to go back to the first volume and pick up the details you might have missed the first time around.

Last Exile is simply a stunning series. Positional Play builds on the foundation established in the first volume and brings the series to new heights of excellence. Whether drawn in by the beautiful imagery, or an outstanding cast, viewers are sure to be entertained by the story that wraps it all together. While it is still not clear where the story is going, or what lies ahead for the main cast, it is evident that the ride should be quite entertaining.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A
Overall (sub) : A
Story : A
Animation : A
Art : A
Music : A

\+ A stunning series that leaves viewers craving for more
− Slow unveiling of the background may frustrate impatient viewers

My collection (2011-06-11 05:49)

anime

Akira
Baccano! (1 boxset)
Castle in the Sky (movie)
Clannad (boxset)
Clannad; After Story (2 boxsets)
Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion complete series (4 volumes)
Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion R2 complete series (4 volumes)
Cowboy Bebop Complete series (1 boxset)
Cowboy Bebop The Movie
Death Note complete series (2 volumes)
Eden of the East (1 boxset)
End of Evangelion (movie)
Eureka Seven complete series (2 volumes)
Eureka Seven: Good Night, Sleep Tight, Young Lovers (movie)
Evangelion: 1.11 You Are [Not] Alone (movie)
Evangelion: 2.22 You Can [Not] Advance (movie) *english subtitles
Full Metal Alchemist complete series (2 volumes)
Full Metal Alchemist Brotherhood (4/5 volumes)
Full Metal Panic (1 boxset)
Full Metal Panic 2nd Raid(1 boxset)
Gankutsuou: The Count of Monte Cristo (boxset)
Gintama (4 boxsets)
Ghost in the Shell 2.0 (movie)
Ghost in the Shell - Stand Alone Complex (1 boxset)
Ghost in the Shell - Stand Alone Complex 2nd Gig (1 boxset)
Ghost in the Shell Stand Alone Complex: Solid State Society (movie)
The Girl Who Leapt Through Time (movie)
Gungrave (boxset)
Haibane Renmei (1 complete boxset)
Kino's Journey (1 boxset)
Last Exile Complete Series (1 boxset)
Lupin the Third: The Castle of Cagliostro (movie)
Macross Plus: Collection (/w English dub)
The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya Season 1 (Anime legends)
Moribito - Guardian of the Spirit Complete Collection (boxset)
Monster (1 boxset)
Mushi-Shi (1 boxset)
Nana (3 boxset)
Neon Genesis Evangelion (1 boxset)
Noein: To Your Other Self (1 cheap complete boxset)
Phantom Requiem for the Phantom (2 boxsets)
RahXephon (1 boxset)
Samurai Champloo (complete series boxset)
Serial Experiments Lain (4 boxset)
Spice and Wolf (1 boxset)
Spirited Away (movie)

Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann (complete series)
Trigun (complete series)
Twelve Kingdoms (2 boxsets)
Vision of Escaflowne (complete boxset)
Welcome to the NHK (1 boxset)
Wolf's Rain (1 boxset)

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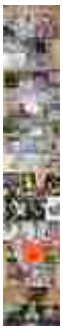
[2] 

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Neon Genesis Evangelion (2011-06-11 22:46)

The Neon Genesis Evangelion saga is back, loaded with new bonus features and featuring an all-new digital makeover for optimum picture and sound quality. In the year 2015, young Shinji Ikari joins his father's secret organization, NERV, to combat the giant enigmatic entities known as the Angels. With the help of his beautiful superior Misato Katsuragi, Shinji must learn to overcome his own fears and doubts before he can hope to save the rest of humanity from total oblivion.

Review:

Yes Eva fans, you have to buy the whole series over again. However, take some solace in the fact that - this time – you will have in your possession the absolute definitive Neon Genesis Evangelion collection.

ADV's Platinum releases will mark the third time I myself have purchased the whole series, and it's the fourth time I've purchased certain episodes (the original Eva Vol. 1 was released sans overlays, and Vols. 7 & 8 were reissued with the Director's Cut episodes included). When ADV first announced it would be releasing GAINAX's digitally remastered prints, my initial reaction was somewhat less than enthusiastic. After all, how many times did ADV think it could empty my pockets with the same material? I had already bought their 13 Eva VHS volumes, then sold them at a considerable loss so I could upgrade to DVD.

But the prospect of enhanced video and sound on what is unquestionably my all-time favorite anime series was enticing to say the least. Let's face it, the first DVD release of the series featured downright piss-poor picture quality. The colors were faded and washed-out, and then there was the infamous "Evangelion Jitter." Every time the camera cut to a different shot, the entire scene jerked slightly from side to side. The effect was hardly noticeable on VHS, but DVD brought this tiny defect into sharp focus. It was greatly frustrating that other favorite series like Cowboy Bebop and Tenchi Muyo! looked so pristine on my TV screen while the mother of them all, Evangelion, looked so drab.

So it was with mixed feelings that I picked up Neon Genesis Evangelion "Volume 1" for the fourth time. 30 seconds after popping the disc into my player, all of my doubts had flown out the window.

We've all seen Evangelion before, many of us several times over. But I'm here to tell you that – unless you've lived in Japan – you've never seen it. Not like this. From the moment when "Cruel Angel's Thesis" begins to play, the show explodes to bright, vivid new life. The colors fairly leap right off of the screen, and suddenly Evangelion looks as fresh and as new as the latest digitally-painted animé series. And that nasty jitter effect? Completely gone. Wrap it all up in brand-new 5.1 surround sound and you have the ultimate Eva viewing experience.

There have been a few slight adjustments made to the English dub. The original actors have returned to re-record the odd line here and there, presumably to bring the script a little closer to the original Japanese intent. But rest assured; ADV did not give Eva the George Lucas Special Edition treatment, and 95 % of the original dub remains intact. As far as the new lines are concerned, the effect is seamless, and only hardcore Eva dub fans will even notice. The "Next Episode" previews have been completely redone by Allison Keith (Misato), however, but they restore the original music to the sequences, and the update is more than welcome.

Even the peripherals have improved a thousand fold. Remember that boring-looking, flimsy black box that housed the original DVD set? Now you can throw it out in favor of this nice and shiny sturdy box that features gorgeous new artwork of all our favorite Eva heroes and heroines. The individual volumes look to feature similarly impressive cast portraits. But best of all may the NERV parking decal included for your car – a slice of pure geek heaven.

The years immediately following the creation of Neon Genesis Evangelion saw the show at the center of an immense controversy in the fan community. Two factions seemed to be forever battling over whether or not Eva was the greatest anime series ever, or just the most overrated. With the passage of time it is possible to look at the series in a more objective light, and it holds up very well indeed. It is a flawed work to be sure, but its breadth of achievement is staggering and its artistic impact undeniable. It no longer seems contrite to say that Evangelion is surely one of the all-time great works of animation.

In Japan this new DVD release was known as "Renewal of Evangelion" (the title had to be changed for the American release because ADV does not have the rights to the Eva theatrical movies included in the Japanese set). "Renewal" may sound a bit pretentious, but it's a more than fitting title. Evangelion has truly been reborn in a way most of us have never seen before. Don't feel bad if you're buying this series over again for the umpteenth time. Eva Platinum is worth every penny.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A+
Overall (sub) : A+
Story : A
Animation : B+

Art : A+
Music : A

+ finally! Evangelion the way it was meant to be seen
− this will be the third time most of us Eva fans have forked out the money for this series

The Eva pilots settle into business as they begin handling missions against the Angels as a trio. As they soon discover, though, not all of the Angels strike directly or with physical might, but that makes them no less dangerous. Meanwhile Misato gets promoted, Ritsuko must deal with the legacy of her mother, and Commander Ikari is off to the South Pole to retrieve something which may ultimately prove important to his plans and those of SEELE, the secret organization behind NERV. Just when things finally seem to be going well, one of the Evas goes berserk during a test!

Review:

This volume, which covers episodes 11-14, continues to mix in more light-hearted elements even as the battles and drama are playing out over the first three episodes. During this time we get important information about the nature of the MAGI supercomputers, a bit of a look at Misato's past, and some key insight into her present motivations. We also get to see Shinji in his most settled state, even though he is still trying to figure out why he's doing what he is. Because of this, Asuka takes the lead amongst the pilots and thus is at her sassy finest. Ritsuko also finally gets some long-needed attention, during which she says a lot of important things which might be passed off as innocuous at first. The last episode, which begins with a thinly-disguised series review, drops any hint of lighter elements (a precursor of things to come) in favor of a rare dip into Rei's psyche and a tense problem with one of the Evas during a test. That episode also hints at some of the more intriguing mysteries in the series to date, though it just provides the viewer with more to think about rather than any clear answers. It also introduces SEELE for the first time and gives us a solid indication that Commander Ikari might be playing a different game than what his bosses intend.

As with earlier episodes, the battle scenes in the first two episodes are suitably exciting and creative, and it's a bit of an extra thrill to finally get to see all three Evas operating in tandem. Episode 13 one-ups the previous two episodes by presenting possibly the most intense Angel encounter yet—and it accomplishes this without true action sequences. No series I have ever seen is as effective as NGE at ramping up tension to nail-biting, edge-of-your-seat levels, and in episode 13 we get a good taste of what the series can achieve. If you've never before seen NGE through until its end, trust me when I say that, as good as that sampling was, the best is still yet to come.

As with most of the series, the technical and artistic merits of this volume, while good, are not exceptional by modern standards. Character designs are distinctive, designed to be sexy rather than cutesy, and use eyes much closer to realistic proportions than most mecha series. The mecha designs are among the most distinctive ever produced for an anime series, with sleek, lithe appearances that look monstrous, fearsome, and nimble rather than boxy and knight-like. Though the scenes animated in detail are well-done, NGE is notorious for the novel shortcuts it uses, such as having characters talk while their mouths are covered (curiously, though, you will see animated blinking in many scenes if you watch closely enough). Those weaned on more recent CGI-laden productions may find it all to look a bit dated, but these visuals were highly influential in 1995. However, NGE's greatest strengths have always lain with its storytelling and emphasis on characterization, a trait which it shares with most other GAINAX titles. In those realms the series has few equals, though this block of episodes is not the best example of what it can achieve.

NGE has never lacked for a quality, effective musical score, and by this point in the series a balance has been achieved which favors dramatic sounds over the overwrought melodrama sometimes heard in

earlier episodes. The opener is still one of the all-time great anime series openers, while the closer continues with the varied renditions of Bart Howard's "Fly Me To The Moon." One of the greatest highlights of the series is its English dub, which I have long considered to be the pinnacle of achievement in English voice work on an anime title. If there is a finer dub of any anime title out there, I have not heard it. Is it a perfect match for the Japanese vocals? No, but you wouldn't want it to be. The rhythms and inflections of English and Japanese are very different, which is something the ADR directors for NGE clearly recognized, so trying to duplicate the original Japanese vocals in a series so dependent on the fineries of character expressiveness would have resulted in the series sounding flat in English. Instead, the English voice actors were allowed to interpret the characters into English speaking terms, which produces some of the best individual performances in all of anime dubbing. The veteran English cast almost universally turns in career-best performances here despite the fact that some of the actors, as you find out in "behind-the-scenes" material and convention interviews, were really playing against type. The highlight performance in this block of episodes goes to Tiffany Grant, who embodies Asuka like no one else could. Some of the credit, of course, must go to the fact that they had an incredible script to work with, including some of the most impressive displays of technobabble you'll hear anywhere. It does stray a bit from the original script, and director Matt Greenfield has stated that some parts would have been translated differently if he could go back and do it over again. I have never felt that any significant meaning was lost, however, and some of the little extra touches (such as Asuka's German invectives) give the dub a more complete and well-rounded feel than the subs do. I find the original Japanese vocals uninteresting by comparison.

I was leery about checking out this new Platinum edition since I already had all the originals and the Director's Cuts. As many others have said, though, the quality of this remastered version is worth it. The sound is distinctly better (although a good stereo system is required to fully appreciate it), some additional background chatter is added in, a few lines are adjusted here and there, and the print is a bit sharper—but even this print occasionally shows slight flaws, only apparent on an HD-caliber TV, a common problem for titles from the mid '90s and earlier. Each episode also uses the original Next Episode pieces and some minor fine-tuning is done throughout to the onscreen text. The tendency to use the undoctored original onscreen text even in the dub is annoying, since one must now switch to the subtitle option to understand them.

The extras are also better than in the original DVD releases. Gone are the Spanish and French language tracks, but in their place we have clean openings and endings, a short featurette on the technical aspects of the English remix process, and commentary tracks for episodes 11 and 13. The former is done by Tiffany Grant and husband Brian Granveldt, who played NERV tech Makoto Hyuga. It is by far the more lively of the two, and brings out interesting tidbits like the fact that the English VAs for all the Eva pilots eventually married the VAs for all the chief NERV techs. The second one is done by director Matt Greenfield and the chief Dolby 5.1 remix tech guy. It is much drier and focuses exclusively on technical aspects of the sound reengineering for most of the episode. While it's interesting to see exactly how much was done for this new version, much of its material could have been shunted off into the Remix featurette. Also included in the extensive liner notes are episode commentaries and more detailed versions of the character profiles that appeared on the original DVDs.

Volume three of the Platinum Edition does not show Neon Genesis Evangelion at its best, but it does give viewers some indication of why this series is widely-considered to be among the greatest anime series ever made. It is worth picking up even if one already owns the originals.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : A
Animation : B

Art : B
Music : A-

+ Superior English dub, intense drama
− some onscreen text isn't translated for the dub

Kaji continues to investigate the deeper secrets of NERV, while others take care of more personal business that often leads to awkward outcomes. Later, the 12th Angel attacks, absorbing a newly-emboldened Shinji into itself! NERV races against time to find a way to extract Unit-01 and Shinji, while Shinji finds himself examining his own inner motivations. Later still a catastrophic accident eliminates the second branch of NERV in the Nevada desert, where Unit-04 was undergoing testing. Unit-03 is shipped to Tokyo in the wake of the incident, requiring the Fourth Child to be activated. And his identity is a surprise to most. . .

Review:

This volume, which covers episodes 15-17, includes only one conflict with an Angel (albeit a very novel one), so action is sparse even though dramatic tension isn't. These episodes instead concentrate heavily on character and plot development, especially the relationships between various characters. A smattering of underlying NERV secrets—some of them startling—are revealed, but nowhere near enough information is available at this point to even make a guess as to what they ultimately mean. Amongst character developments, we get a full dose of Misato's insecurities and Shinji's ongoing internal dialogue. It is also becoming clear that Asuka may have some serious issues which are going to be real trouble for her later on. Lesser characters Toji and Hikari also get some attention, and even Rei is starting to show signs that she may be capable of more emotion that she's shown so far, though she understands poorly what she's feeling. Ultimately the purpose of these episodes, and all the developments in them, is to position all the key players and set up circumstances to exploit during the intense end run of the series. Even something as seemingly innocuous as Asuka's interesting way to kill time takes on greater meaning when one looks back after seeing the later episodes. For those who haven't already seen the rest of the series, a piece of advice: nothing that happens in these episodes is coincidence. Even the smallest details matter.

Most of my comments about the artistry, technical merits, music, and value of the Platinum edition for this volume are identical to those in my review for Platinum 3 so I will not repeat them here. I will add that episode 16 is the first time that NGE's unique brand of introspection, complete with the "train scenes," is used. We also get the first major samples of the "flash" scenes that permeate the later episodes and movies. Both are characteristics which were, to my knowledge, unique to NGE at the time of its creation.

On the English dub front the voice acting continues to be very strong, with Allison Keith turning in a stand-out performance as Misato in episode 15 and Spike Spencer doing top-rate work as Shinji in episode 16. Otherwise, see my comments for the Platinum 3 review.

The extras one again include clean opener and closer and extensive liner notes which replace the original bio files. Also included in the liner notes are the regular (and very insightful) episode commentaries, a description of the process used for footage renewal, a breakdown of all the different versions of "Fly Me To The Moon" used in the episode closer, and the first part of the comprehensive Evangelion glossary—but, fair warning, this glossary contains some spoilers for later episodes. The commentary track this time is for episode 15 and features Tiffany Grant (Asuka) and Matt Greenfield (the English dub director). It is less insightful than the ones in the previous volume, but Tiffany Grant is always interesting to listen to on a commentary track. Unique extras on the disc include an "animatic" version of episode 15 and a featurette called "That Little Red-Haired Girl," where Tiffany Grant proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that she is

Asuka's #1 fan as well as her English voice actress.

With volume 4, NGE continues to increase the quality of its storytelling while introducing to mecha degrees of character study that the typically action-oriented genre had never seen before. The assorted mysteries of the series accumulate further as it sets up for the powerhouse final three volumes. If you've enjoyed the ride so far, stay tuned: the best is on its way.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A
Overall (sub) : B
Story : A
Animation : B
Art : B
Music : A-

+ Continued superb English voice work

Mush-Shi (2011-06-14 22:43)

Ginko is a mushi-shi, a traveling healer who resolves problems caused by beings known as mushi. The mushi are things that occupy the gap between living beings and inanimate objects, very close to being manifestations of the life-force itself. Invisible to most, their effects are very, very real. In his travels Ginko helps a boy whose drawings come to life resolve his issues with his departed grandmother. He attempts to cure a girl whose over-sensitivity to light is caused by a mushi that lives in her eyes. He frees a snowy village from a plague of mushi that are consuming the village's sounds. He attends to a man who has prophetic dreams, and tries to free a young girl from her potentially lethal bond with a living swamp that is migrating to the sea.

Review:

Mushi-Shi is a rare animal indeed: a fascinating, unique viewing experience in a market flooded with strait-jacketed genre clones. To be sure, the wandering healer narrative has been used before, and the episodic structure and mystical touches recall works like Hell Girl and Requiem from the Darkness. However, those are but shallow comparisons for something that combines the naturalist's eye and hypnotic pacing of obtuse Russian auteur Andrei Tarkovsky with the lush art and ecological concerns of Hayao Miyazaki, and complements them with a quietly intense personal focus and engrossing mythology all its own.

The tales it tells are simple; tales of loneliness, illness, despair, and sacrifice, ever so human and yet eerily supernatural. Each episode gently insinuates us into the lives and minds of its protagonists, evoking surprisingly strong responses to the tragedy, hope, and quiet triumph they experience. What makes Mushi-Shi unique, though, is the intertwining of these human tales with the world around them, with the boundless universe of nature, with the green growing things, animals, and strange, ethereal mushi. It's a relationship evoked by the way human structures—ancient, complex and organic in their own right—melt effortlessly into their surroundings—be they misty emerald forests, rocky seaside pine, or silent snow-swathed mountains—and by the incorporation of traditionally garbed humans, plants, and swirling mushi into a

single, beautiful organic whole. The world of the mushi is a carefully realized one, based—despite their fantastical traits—in existing ecology and environments. They may eat sound and silence, be living swamps, or live in the gaping abyss behind a girl's ruined eyes, but the mushi's most prominent trait is the magic they impart to seemingly mundane objects—to mossy rocks, unfurling leaves, aged vault doors and wooden rooms. The haunting minimalist score, the natural yet evocative dialogue, the heartbreaking beauty of the art, the sparing use of flashy effects for the mushi, the simple yet beautiful characters, it all weaves a world that is as much a trance-like spell as it is a physical place.

Funimation's dub preserves the feel and overall effect of the show. The actors, despite the majority of them playing one-shot single episode roles, do well with the emotions and complexities of their roles. Travis Wilmington does a fine job as Ginko, the only recurring character (besides the narrator). Unfortunately Funimation's freewheeling approach to re-writes is a strategy that works well in mediocre, poor, or similarly freewheeling shows, but has definite adverse effects when applied to something as carefully calibrated and sophisticated as this show is. The rewrite nails the emotional side, but falters occasionally with more intellectual passages when the paraphrasing loses the original meaning (i.e. Ginko's musings on the true meaning of the absolute silence experienced by a boy's mother just before death).

Between the tour of the animation studio, a discussion between director Hiroshi Nagahama and lead actor Yuto Nakano, and an interview with Nagahama alone, there're nearly forty minutes of behind-the-scenes footage on this disc. It isn't the most entertaining set of extras—Nagahama makes for a rather boring interview—but it's quite informative, full of tidbits such as demonstrations of the extent of Nagahama's loyalty to the original manga, and a mention of chameleonic composer Toshio Masuda's decision to tailor-make different compositions for each episode's ending sequence (only one of the five versions on this disc is presented clean in the extras though). Also included is a clean version of the superb Simon & Garfunkel-esque opener.

At once deeply human and utterly alien, mystical and earthily secular, Mushi-Shi beckons us—like the closing of second eyelids—to look at the world with new eyes, to go out and revel in the wonder of an eroded stone or the fractal veins of a leaf. It's enough to bring out the hippie in even the most hardened anime veteran. Images—a tidal wave of mushi pouring from girl's empty eye-sockets, a golden summer sky aswarm with flocks of feathery mushi—will haunt the mind's eye; emotions—the tender joy of another's company, the aching pain of loss—will linger in the heart. But the greatest achievement of all is to change, however briefly, our perception of the world around us. It's an end many strive for but few achieve, and Mushi-Shi does so without once allowing the effort to strain its calm, measured rhythm.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A
Story : A-
Animation : A-
Art : A
Music : A

\+ A nearly flawless evocation of a world of mystery, exquisite natural beauty, and honest humanity.
− Not for those in search of cheap thrills, melodrama or belly-laughs.

In five more tales of Ginko's eternal study of the otherworldly creatures known as mushi, the wandering mushi-shi provides his services to yet another group of mushi-affected humans. A boy hires him to cure his sweetheart, who was transformed against her will into a "living god" by her ruthlessly opportunistic

father. A search for food brings him to a village that has weathered famine using a forbidden manipulation of the life-force from which the mushi spring, one that sacrifices the life of a villager to ensure a bumper harvest. He assists a young man trying to come to terms with the death of his wife after she disappeared during a domestic dispute, and helps another young man trying to capture a rainbow and bring it to his ailing father. Later his old friend Dr. Adashino requests his assistance in curing three village children after an inkstone in the doctor's care afflicts them with a potentially fatal disease.

Review:

Unique works that defy classification are extremely rare in any medium. While not without precedent, Mushi-Shi is quite unique, and definitely difficult to pin into a category. The quality of Mushi-Shi goes beyond simply squirming away from categorization though; it's a work so beautiful on so many levels that it gives chills, a treasure so precious that only a fool would pass it by.

It's a near-perfect confluence of imagery and the story-telling art. It weaves tales of wonder with exquisite images, with mountains, fields, plains, plateaus, rivers and oceans. Settings possessed of a hypnotic natural charm, full of trees and rocks and life; settings enhanced by the ethereal beauty of the mushi while simultaneously being the only imaginable places where such creatures could dwell. Humans and their constructs, instead of standing in contrast to the wild, blend seamlessly in—part of the natural order rather than outside of or in opposition to it. Every episode includes at least one sequence of transcendental power, of almost religious awe—a woman dissolving into a foaming mass of mushi, children on a mountaintop pouring clouds into the sky from their mouths and ears, a rainbow river of light bursting from the ground and flowing into the heavens. The animation of these moments—and the remainder of each episode—is superb without grandstanding or calling attention to the skill with which it is deployed. The indescribable thrill that accompanies those moments would be unthinkable without it, as unthinkable as it would be without the support of Toshio Masuda's haunting, achingly beautiful score.

The stories described by this imagery demonstrate a beauty that goes beyond the merely aesthetic. The structure is purely episodic, which might be a liability in a lesser series, but in Mushi-Shi simply highlights its preternatural ability to weave dramas of often wrenching power in the bare twenty-three minutes allowed per episode. There's a deeply felt sympathy, a core of kindness and understanding that the writers bring to bear on these occasionally tragic tales. The result is warm and unutterably human, insinuating viewers into the mystical via emotions and dilemmas that are often painfully real and familiar. The living rainbows, tidal waves of snakelike mushi and glowing pools of liquid life-force might be little more than fanciful images were not the path to each paved with life circumstances—the desire to make a parent proud, the need for closure after the death of a loved one, the fear and glory of self-sacrifice—that transform them into subtle emotional forces with a power that belies their lack of traditional theatrics.

The series matches the quietly affecting drama with recurrent intellectual concerns explored with equally unobtrusive flair. The mushi have their own ecology—webs of interaction and feeding, their own rules of behavior and logic. Tragedy in their contact with man comes not from malice but from ignorance of their ecology, just as the solutions come from Ginko's understanding and knowledge. The series regularly revisits ideas about subjectivity, in the "living god" episode exploring the differences in the perception of time between normal people and those possessed by mushi. Even the implications of Ginko's lifestyle are briefly explored in the rainbow episode. It's impossible to root under the surface of this series without practically tripping over an interesting idea, but they are free of the ponderous philosophizing and endless sophistry that might otherwise interfere with the series' ability to simply entertain.

Funimation has dubbed this title with unusual fidelity and accuracy given their rather notoriously liberal ways. The tenor of the acting, the careful casting of its lead (as well as Adashino, the only other recurring character), the attentive translation and scripting—it's all pitched perfectly to preserve the unique charm of the series. The issue with retaining some of the more difficult nuances of complex ideas is gone, and every emotional twinge of the original makes the transition intact.

In two separate on-disc interviews, director Hiroshi Nagahama talks with character designer Yoshihiko Umakoshi and art director Takeshi Waki. The two interviews confirm the central role that artwork plays in making Mushi-Shi what it is and demonstrate the unforced affection its crew has for it. A clean version of Ally Kerr's excellent opener is also provided along with, unfortunately, only one of the many unique, delicate closers that Toshio Masuda composed for the series.

Don't let all the digging scare you off; it isn't necessary to deconstruct the series to enjoy it. Doing so allows one to better quantify exactly what the elusive magic of this series is, but the magic is present and irrefutable regardless of how deep one wishes to dig. Unlike the works of more overtly intellectual directors like Mamoru Oshii, this series doesn't try to blast you from your anime doldrums with the proverbial shotgun. Instead it lures you gently away with a siren song of genuine wonder and enchantment, an irresistible tune as compelling as anything the Pied Piper ever composed.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A
Overall (sub) : A
Story : A
Animation : A
Art : A+
Music : A+

+ Watch and you'll be touched; dig and you'll smack your head on some fascinating concept; without doubt the best anime currently in release.
− Simple, personal focus not for those expecting epic scope or plotting.

Eight more stories of the mushi master (aka mushi-shi) Ginko's journeys across the land and his encounters with assorted mushi play out, including "The One-Eyed Fish," which involves the circumstances that led to Ginko adopting his name and becoming a mushi master himself. Others in volume 3 include "The Sleeping Mountain," concerning a fellow mushi master who serves the guardian of a mountain; "The One-Night Bridge," concerning a young man whose beloved fell through a bridge into a ravine and survived, but has behaved abnormally ever since; and "Inside the Cage," about a man who seems unable to leave the bamboo forest he has come to call home. Those in volume 4 include "Pretense of Spring," about a boy thrown into a hibernating state by his winter encounter with mushi that mimic spring; "Sunrise Serpent," about a woman whose mushi infection causes her to gradually lose her memories; "Picker of Empty Cocoons," about a twin sister lost in a mushi-related accident; and "Clothes That Embrace the Mountain," about a man who left his home mountain behind to become a famous painter, only to be drawn back years later.

Review:

That Mushi-Shi is a unique series of extraordinary merit is beyond reproach. To deny this is to refuse to acknowledge that the series has done something truly different. By melding its music, visuals, voice work, and storytelling into a unified whole, it spins stand-alone stories of sublime beauty which speak to the

essence of life and death in a style which harkens back to ancient fables told around a fire at night. The serene mood it establishes, even when dealing with the fantastic and/or dangerous mushi, can wrap a viewer up in its wonder. It can also, unfortunately, bore viewers unable or unwilling to slide into the comfortable place the series constructs, and can get tedious if too much of it is watched at once.

While the quality of the series may be inarguable, its entertainment value is very much subject to debate. So much of its ability to involve its viewers depends on acceptance of the low-key, spiritual tone that some are going to find the series intolerable, and volumes 3 and 4 do nothing to change that. Those who prefer an ongoing storyline of some sort, or like to become attached to characters over the long term and watch them grow, may also find it hard to connect with the series, since nearly every episode is completely independent of the others and the only recurring character – Ginko – never develops much beyond his base persona.

Those who can get into the spirit of the series will find several captivating stories about ordinary people's interaction with phenomenon beyond their comprehension, ones which Ginko can try to help them understand and live with. The mushi, as portrayed here, are neither good nor evil, neither outwardly benevolent nor inherently malicious, although they can be dangerous and certainly have both positive and adverse effects on those who get too closely involved with them. Dealing with them is like dealing with nature; there are no foes to be defeated here, just creatures to be understood and compensated for. That storytelling approach incontrovertibly set the series apart from all of the brighter and flashier anime series out there.

While no episode in this span ever completely fails at being compelling, their effectiveness varies. Some feel rushed in working all of their elements into a single 24-minute episode, or end too quickly; this is a particular problem with "Clothes That Embrace The Mountain." The episode "Picker of Empty Cocoons" is the most gimmicky but still has its moments, while "The Sleeping Mountain" and "One-Eyed Fish" arguably make the strongest impressions. The average story quality is slightly lower in volume 4, but those episodes are still better than most stand-alone fare.

As mentioned before, the artistry and music function more to craft a unified whole than impress individually, creating a beautiful overall package which absorbs its minor flaws without being weighted down by them. The character designs never impress but nonetheless suit the style of a series more about plain, ordinary people trying to live their lives than flashy individuals trying to do great things. The background art and mushi designs do impress, but the true visual appeal lies in how the series frames its shots, uses its special visual effects, and combines everything to promote a certain effect; one of the Extras on volume 3 reports that about 80 % of the series was re-shot in pursuit of just the right look, and that attention to quality control shows. The gentle musical score flows smoothly out of the English language opener and into the closers without a hiccup or change in style, along the way gently punctuating key moments and evenly promoting the spiritual tone and subdued mood.

That mood also carries through the voice acting in both dubs, as the number of times in these eight episodes that characters actually raise their voices can probably be counted on one hand. That doesn't allow much room for expressive acting, and on top of that the English dub is even more dedicated to maintaining the atmosphere than the Japanese dub. The one-shot performances encompass a myriad of normal Funimation and ADV dub actors, from old-timers like Tiffany Grant to prominent newcomers like Brittney Karbowski, and will neither excite nor disappoint in most cases. In this case, though, it is probably more important that a given performance doesn't stand out.

For Extras, both volumes include the standard textless opener and closer, accompanying booklet with character profiles and sketches, and pair of Mushi-Shi postcards. Both also have two more parts of the

"Mushi Talks" Director interviews. In volume 3, Part 4 focuses on the sound direction, while Part 5 focuses on the filming. In volume 4, Part 6 deals with music direction and Part 7 concerns opener direction. These can be quite enlightening and should be considered must-views by dedicated fans of the series. Both volumes also come inside cardboard slipcovers.

If the first two volumes worked for you then so will these, but if neither of them worked for you then these will not, either. If you have held off on watching this series, whether because you just have not gotten around to it or because you don't think its style would suit you, you owe it to yourself to at least give it a try. Whether you like it or not, this is one of the year's best.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : A-
Animation : B+
Art : A-
Music : A

+ Beautiful look, incredible job of establishing and maintaining a unified mood and tone.
− May bore some people.

Four final tales of mushi and mushi-shi Ginko present themselves for consideration. In "The Sound of Rust," a 14-year-old girl has remained silent for years after it became apparent to her that some quality in her voice was attracting a crippling rust-like mushi to her village. In "The Journey to the Field of Fire," Ginko comes into conflict with another mushi-shi over her efforts to eradicate a harmful weed-like mushi by burning it out, efforts which ultimately have an unexpected side effect. In "Eye of Fortune, Eye of Misfortune," a girl gains clairvoyant vision when a mythical mushi infects her eyeballs, which over time gradually proves to be more a curse than a benefit. The last story, "The Sound of Footsteps on the Grass," flashes back to Ginko's youth, where a boy whose father protects a misty mountain strikes up a friendship with a boy from a group of travelers who visit the mountain every year during the rainy season. (And no, neither is Ginko.)

Review:

The disadvantage to having the kind of purely episodic structure that Mushi-Shi does is that when the last episode comes, the series just ends. There is no sense of closure or finality, no "they lived happily ever after" or "their story continues;" there just aren't any more episodes coming. In fact, Episode 26 does nothing to distinguish itself from any other episode in the whole series, as its lack of the normal opener is not even unique within this volume. (Episode 24 also lacks it.) Mushi-Shi has never made any intimations that it has any grander story than the individual tales of Ginko's encounters with assorted mushi, though, so the way the series ends should not come as any surprise to someone who has been watching it from the beginning.

The advantage to the format is, of course, that a viewer need not know anything about the series beyond the premises described in its Encyclopedia blurb to fully appreciate the wonderful individual stories told in this volume. Of course, most people watching this volume are going to be fans who fell in love with the series early on, but with just a little bit of up-front explanation you could show these episodes to someone who has never seen the series before and they might still fully appreciate it. And while these four episodes may vary a little in storytelling quality, any of them offer up a fine stylistic and thematic representation of the series as a whole.

Of these four episodes, "The Sound of footsteps on the Grass" (i.e. episode 26) is arguably the weakest and most mundane despite offering a couple of the prettiest pieces of background artistry in the entire series; imagine a mountainside shrouded in mist tinged with reddish-purple or gold hues. It actually does nothing wrong and does have its own merits, but it lacks the mushi-focused emphasis of the other three and its more human story proves not as compelling as most others. "Eye of Fortune, Eye of Misfortune" (episode 25) suffers slightly because it lacks the pure originality of many others in the series, but the beauty of an early scene where Amane sees for the first time and a discomfiting late scene where the ultimate effect of the Ganpuku on her eyes is realized more than balance out its minor storytelling inequities. "The Sound of Rust" (episode 23) and "The Journey to the Field of Fire" (episode 24) rank among the series' best episodes, however, as both spin strong, involving, and compelling yarns about misfortune caused by encounters with mushi and the ways Ginko helps discover to work around them. They are the kind of episodes that can leave a viewer with a sense of awe as the music fades into the mellow closer, a sense that the viewer has watched something truly special.

And that is what keeps people coming back to this series, and what has made Mushi-Shi one of the highest-rated shows by fans here at ANN. Sure, its stories may be too low-key and mellow (some might say boring) to sufficiently entertain some viewers, as the series works best when a viewer just sits back and allows themselves to be wrapped up in the mood each episode establishes, but the quality of its production in all aspects except Ginko's character design, and how all of its elements work together to craft the whole, is self-evident. Its human character designs may be unglamorous and offer little major variation in appearance beyond Ginko, but that helps emphasize the plain rural settings and keeps attention on the story and the mushi rather than the characters' appearances, which is much more important here than in the vast majority of anime series out there. Its background art sets the story in gorgeous mountain vistas without overplaying them, while its depictions of the mushi themselves are endlessly inventive and certain individual scenes (such as Amane's first sight) delight with their stunningly effective beauty. The strains of the invariably low-key music and the equally subdued vocal performances keep the tone just right, assuring that the production never descends into needless over-dramatization. Putting an excellent animation job on top of all of that seems like a bonus.

As it has done over the course the series, the English script continues to use "mushi master" where the subtitles use "Mushi-Shi" but leaves untranslated some other names and titles that are translated in the subtitles. The script varies some through these episodes, but not at much as in most other Funimation productions. Casting decisions and performances should offer little cause for dispute, as the English performances, if anything, are actually a bit subtler on portrayal of emotion in some key scenes. The most noteworthy difference comes with Shige, the young heroine of "The Sound of Rust," who sounds convincingly hoarse in English but much more forced in Japanese. Also of note is Aaron Dismuke's casting as young Ginko in episode 26; let's just say that he will not ever be reprising his role as Fullmetal Alchemist's Al.

Funimation's production has never shorted the series on Extras and does not start doing so here. In addition to the standard textless songs, on-disc Extras include a 37-minute exploration of the Japanese production site for the series, a sampling of the English translation of the manga version, and an English audio commentary for episode 26 by ADR director Mike McFarland and Travis Willingham, the voice of Ginko; its most interesting comment is that series director Hiroshi Nagahama apparently enthusiastically approved of the English dub when he heard it during its premiere at Anime Expo last year. The case uses the standard slipcover and includes a reversible normal cover, a series postcard, and an 8-page liner book with character sketches and profiles.

One thing that this volume does offer that was rarely seen previously in the series is a faint sense of humor, as one scene each in episodes 23 and 24 has a light-hearted feel. Overall, though, these four

episodes are just more of the same, and in the case of Mushi-Shi, that is definitely a Good Thing.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : A
Animation : A-
Art : A-
Music : A-

+ Excellent storytelling, beautiful individual scenes.
− Minor issues with some scene transitions, Ginko's character design.

Monster (2011-06-15 22:36)

Brilliant neurosurgeon Kenzo Tenma defies the political flunkies in charge of his hospital when he insists on operating in order of arrival, saving the life of a gunshot boy while a late-arriving local politician dies. Though he loses his position and his fiancée as a result, the decision awakens him to the true purpose of his profession. Newly devoted to serving the ill and saving lives, he wears himself to a nub. When the same flunkies remove him as the boy's attending physician, all three are poisoned and die. The boy and his shell-shocked sister disappear that night and a bewildered Tenma is promoted to Head of Surgery, subsequently earning the suspicion of a very scary inspector. Nine years later Tenma is still working as Head of Surgery, his devotion to healing earning the love and respect of staff and patients alike. When he saves the life of a petty burglar suspected of killing a series of childless middle-aged couples, he befriends the man, urging him to confess what he knows. But when he does he destroys Tenma's life once again. Because he killed those couples at another's behest. At the behest of the child Tenma once saved.

Review:

It's hard to describe Monster. Part evil fairy tale, part spy thriller, part moral study, and all dark resonance, it's something akin to a myth: an Odyssey for the bleak, byzantine years directly after fall of the Soviet Union. It's frightening, addictive, and amongst anime series, pretty much without precedent.

But before all of that, Monster is a thriller. And a good one. Set in Germany in the '80s and '90s, it takes the uncertain times surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall and paints upon them a tale of hidden evil, justice miscarried, and murder most foul. The series owes an obvious debt to Hitchcock (a debt it itself acknowledges by borrowing a pivotal scene from The 39 Steps), and it learned well at the Master's knee. The man himself couldn't put the screws to his audience better than Monster does during Tenma's descent from respected surgeon to serial murder suspect. It's an unbearably tense series, mounting terror cycling with cathartic release, each turn of which—the poisoning at the hospital, the confession of the burglar, the rescue of Johan's sister—leaves the series in a very different, and usually more frightening place. Even the series' side-stories—in which it catches up with secondary characters like the fiancée and the inspector—are tiny little marvels of small-scale cinematic sadism.

To this stew of wrong-man thrills and twisty chills the series adds a strong flavor of moral discourse. Tenma's journey doesn't just force the poor man into a series of escalating confrontations with the evil he inadvertently unleashed, but also asks some difficult questions of us. Is all life created equal? Is murder ever justified? Is saving a life ever wrong? How is evil created, and to what lengths are we justified in the pursuit of its destruction? Timely and knotty, Monster's moral paradoxes have no easy answers, and it offers none. Which is as it should be. And yet, through all of the human experimentation, greedy carnage, and righteous homicidal urges, the series somehow keeps its moral compass oriented due north. It never loses sight of the humanity of its characters, or of the human realities that underlie even the most heinous crimes.

With one exception: Johan. Johan's motivations aren't comprehensible by any human standard. That isn't a criticism; because Johan isn't human. Johan is a monster. As intelligent as the rest of the series is, it is in Johan that it crosses the line from smart to brilliant. He is a creation of such genius that he almost lies outside of the boundaries of the story, a bogeyman who could conceivably be called upon to scare bad children straight. It is he who pushes the series beyond mere thrillerhood into the realm of dark mythology. He's an abomination risen from the ashes of the Cold War to cast a bone-chilling shadow over Monster's world, a presence of such cold, omnipotent evil that he is more analogous to the dark gods of ancient tales than to any person. It is in his presence—or more accurately, in his black shadow—that the series hits its chilling heights, that it achieves a primeval resonance, like a nightmare recounted in moonless dark.

If the series has a weakness, it's in its unhealthy fidelity to Naoki Urasawa's original manga. Director Masayuki Kojima made faithfulness his watchword in adapting Monster, and faithful he is. In fact, calling him faithful is an awful understatement; kind of like calling those widows who used to bury themselves in their husband's graves faithful. Like clockwork each episode covers exactly two chapters of the manga: there isn't a scene left out, only a handful added in, and as far as I can tell not a line of dialogue changed or omitted. Kojima obsessively recreates Urasawa's visuals, from his realistic, idiosyncratic designs, to his carefully-crafted compositions and fondness for expressive angles. There's nothing overtly wrong with that—in fact, given the quality of the manga, it's hard to imagine doing it any other way. Nevertheless, particularly for those already familiar with the comic, watching what is essentially a careful reproduction of the original can seem a waste. At least at first.

It doesn't take long, however, for the series to cast the same spell as its literary precursor. Madhouse's dark, supple animation is more than up to the job of capturing, and even improving on, the cinematic quality of Urasawa's art. Kojima's decision to use actors with experience in live-action dubbing gives the dialogue veracity, and Kuniaki Haishima's dissonant score adds immeasurably to the series' hair-raising atmosphere. One look at the dead eyes of a pair of suspiciously helpful cops, a single earful of Inspector Lunge's richly intoned suspicions, and you'll forget all about comparing print with celluloid.

Viz goes for a similar level of anal fidelity. Their English adaptation is one of their most carefully cast and deliberately accurate in recent memory. Only a bare minimum of alterations are made to the dialogue; enough to stave off unnaturally cumbersome phrasing, but not enough to piss off even the most sensitive viewer. The performances range from good (any number of creaky old ladies; Tenma; most of the secondary cast) to superb (Doug Erholtz's slippery Otto Heckel; Keith Silverstein's grotesquely warm Johan). It's easier to pick holes in than the Japanese, but not appreciably so.

For extras goodness, look no further than disc three, which includes an extensive portfolio of background information and interviews that is most helpful in making sense of the German setting

Given its faithfulness, fans of the manga will know that the series won't get any better than this. That knowledge is as close as this set gets to a fault. Well, that and the licensing problems that presumably prevented Viz from using David Sylvian's creepy original closing. Very few series can knot the gut the way

Monster can, and fewer still while simultaneously knotting your brain and breaking your heart. If that doesn't sound like your definition of a good time, look elsewhere. To everyone else: welcome to Tenma and Johan's world. Don't expect to be released anytime soon.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : A
Animation : A-
Art : A
Music : A-

+ A superlative thriller with undertones of moral debate and a dark power that goes far beyond its skill with suspense; Johan.
− Obsessively faithful to its source material; this is as good as the series gets.

Nana (2011-06-18 22:41)

On a snowbound train two young women meet. Despite being the same age, heading the same direction and, most curiously, sharing the same name, Nana Komatsu and Nana Osaki couldn't be more different. Nana Komatsu—or Hachi, as she is soon to be known—is a flighty, love-addicted bundle of energy in hot pursuit of her relocated beau. Nana Osaki—or just plain Nana—is a scarred and defiantly independent musician looking to make her name in Tokyo's punk rock scene. To the delight of both, and consternation of their respective friends, they fit together like two long-lost pieces of the same puzzle. As they settle into their life together—they decide, after some divine intervention, to split a flat—Nana reassembles the shattered pieces of her old band and Hachi negotiates the thorny byways of true love. But as both know all too well, life is a thug with a crowbar up its sleeve, and it's only a matter of time before it clobbers you over the head. That's the beauty of friendship though: having someone there to pick you up and drag you to the hospital when it does.

Review:

You can't talk about NANA without talking about the relationship around which Ai Yazawa coils her knotty tale of life in cosmopolitan Tokyo. It's not a romantic relationship, at least not in the conventional sense. Neither is it a friendship in the conventional sense. Rather, Nana and Hachi's relationship is something in between; two people finding in their friendship the soul-mate that they could never quite find in their romantic relations with the opposite sex. It's an incredibly odd and yet somehow very real relationship, and probably the most conspicuous example of Yazawa's vaunted skill with characterization. Creating an ostensibly mismatched pair who fit as seamlessly together as Nana and Hachi is a tricky business, and doing so with the honesty and gimlet eye for emotional consequences that Yazawa brings to bear is worthy of the overused epithet of "genius."

But for this first set of episodes, that isn't really so important. We could speak of Yazawa's uncanny insights into the complementary faults that make the two so compatible, or her deadeye accuracy in capturing the conflicting feelings of those on the outer edges of friendship, or the organic flow the two Nanas' relationship as it forms, intensifies, and ultimately cracks. But that is fodder for a later date. NANA will

eventually become anime's single greatest statement on the power, both constructive and destructive, of a single friendship, as well as one of the few dramas of truly epic breadth and depth, but here in the throes of its introductory growing pains it is only (only?) a nigh-perfect snapshot of that queasily uncertain time after high school and before the rest of your life.

Already the series' signature mix of unflinching realism and deeply-felt sympathy is firmly in place, effortlessly shaping a cast of believably flawed and infectiously likeable characters and almost unconsciously tossing off scenes of heartbreaking honesty. It gets that intangible aura of directionlessness and looming, unstoppable change frighteningly right, and it wraps it all in a rich and achingly ephemeral sense of time and place. Watching NANA is unsettlingly like living through your twenties all over again—only cooler and sexier. Director and master technician Morio Asaka filters Yazawa's fashions and urban environs through his own cinematic sensibilities to create a living, breathing and very seductive Tokyo, and he polishes each scene until it shines like a dark jewel. If you aren't completely won over by the time Nana, decked in her punk finery and wreathed in moonlight, performs solo for Hachi, well, you may want to check your pulse. Likely as not, you're dead.

Viz continues their winning streak with another fine dub. Kelly Sheridan attacks the role of Hachi with bracing enthusiasm, the supporting cast is strong, and the scripting is tight and, when need be, inventive. The real revelation, however, is Rebecca Shoichet, whose slender resume gives no warning of the smoky charisma she brings to the role of Nana. Nevertheless, the difference in the depth of Japan and America's respective talent pools shows. Sheridan, Shoichet and the rest are taking over for a cast of voice-acting superstars, nearly all giving the performances of their lives. No matter how careful and professional the dub, it's hard to compete with a Japanese track that can cram the likes of Kenji Hamada and Emi Shinohara into peripheral roles and populate the main cast with talents like Akira Ishida and Tomokazu Seki, to say nothing of the underrated Kaori and magnificent Romi Paku. Sad, but true.

A short but telling interview with Morio Asaka and the usual art gallery and clean OP and ED (a pair of rocking angst punkers) are on hand to stave off extras starvation. If you want to be well-fed, though, go elsewhere.

It's almost futile to rave about NANA. Praising its construction, its wonderful central relationship, its cast, its intelligence and emotional maturity—it's all woefully inadequate. Go on about the black-leather luminescence of its art or the artful stylization of its animation as you will (with MADHOUSE and Asaka behind it, you'd be amiss if you didn't), deify Ai Yazawa if you want (the Goddess of Ugly Love?), parse, analyze, and deconstruct—it stands up to it all—but ultimately none of that can communicate the magic of the show; the way it can make your heart to that little two-step, the way it makes your blood stir and your chest hitch a little. Hell, by episode two, it has you feeling like dizzy little Nana. Like a fool in love. And in love with someone you just know is going to break your heart. That's a feeling no words can do justice—you just have to experience it for yourself.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A
Overall (sub) : A+
Story : A
Animation : A
Art : A+
Music : A

+ A nearly flawless adult drama: powerful, insightful, and most importantly, human; in short, one of the greatest anime of all time. No joke.

− Can be difficult to watch; recap episodes; Sid Vicious is not, repeat not a role model.

When Shoji meets Sachiko, the accidental namesake of Hachi's imaginary rival, he knows he's in trouble. And sure enough, mere episodes later everyone is in a world of hurt. Hachi, upon learning that Nana's ex is Trapnest guitarist Ren, throws herself into reuniting the separated lovers, as much to distract herself as to help her friend. The result isn't as clean as she'd like, but it does afford her a chance to meet her idol Takumi, Trapnest's bassist. Whereupon a whole new world of hurt comes knocking.

Review:

NANA isn't terribly enamored of plotting. Not that it's plotless—anything but—just that it doesn't try imposing narrative order on the chaos of its characters' lives. On the surface that can make it feel a little rudderless. But such a judgment misses entirely the point of NANA. NANA isn't about events, it's about people and experiences. Its purpose lies not in constructing a neatly cresting narrative, but in capturing the reality of life and the poignancy of change at the cusp of adulthood. And it does so with the multifaceted perfection of a fine gem.

The question going into this set is whether the series can maintain that perfection: its honesty, potency, and indeed plain old excellence. Firing on all cylinders for fifty episodes isn't easy to do, and all twelve episodes (well, eleven if you discount the recap) pass with the expectation that the show will trip up somewhere, will somehow flop, fall flat or at least stumble or slip. Even if just momentarily. But it never does. One wonderfully formed scene after another the series does nothing but impress. If the previous set was falling in love with a series you know will break your heart, this is the series breaking your heart. Nearly every scene glitters with telling little touches that open foggy windows into the hearts of its protagonists, while pointing the way towards swelling changes that wash with tide-like regularity through their lives. A parking-lot confrontation where Hachi's heart shatters like glass only to reform into something even more unyielding; a concert where music sets free a torrent of repressed emotion; a late-night tryst driven by a toxic upwelling of self-loathing—again and again the series builds to moments that sear themselves into the memory, and every time their power and unsparing realism comes as a surprise.

The facility of Ai Yazawa's writing is nothing short of astonishing. Even as the series prepares itself to tear your heart out and dance a high-heeled polka on it, it is shining a light through the bewilderingly familiar prism of its characters' personalities. Starkly exposed is both the fragility and the self-reproach that bubble beneath Hachi's blithe self-interest. Briefly glimpsed are the doubt and need that NANA hides behind her brash front. Compassion buds in Hachi, twisted by her self-absorption, just as appreciation buds in NANA, twisted by dependence. The two intertwine, the layers of each personality complementing the other's in ways both healing and imperiling. It's a dance of personalities as delicate as it is powerful, and hands-down the greatest achievement in a series crowded with them.

But it isn't the only one, nor are they all Yazawa's. Her vision is broad, thorny and incisive—never does it flinch from ugly realities, and not once does a relationship, personality or development ring false—but without Morio Asaka that would mean little. Asaka teases every nuance of feeling and meaning from Yazawa's story, forming hugely complex emotions with limited resources and then beaming them to us via some form of animated cinematic telepathy. No gesture, expression or visual flourish is without its corresponding meaning, no shift in the score's tempo or insertion of a Black Stones song without its effect on us. He juggles Yazawa's multiple storylines with virtuosic ease, deftly handles her characters, and almost off-handedly arranges some of anime's finest concert set-pieces. Heck, the Black Stone's first Tokyo concert is

worth the price of admission alone.

Given the series' glossy perfection, every imperfection in Viz's dub stands out like a zit on a supermodel. It isn't a bad or even substandard dub by any stretch. Indeed it has some potent charms, not the least of which is Rebecca Shoichet's wonderful turn as NANA. It does, however, make mistakes. Little things that you usually wouldn't notice in a dub: inflections missed by a margin, delicate timing thrown off by necessary rewrites, hitches in performances. In a normal series they would mean nothing, but here they are highly visible flaws that occasionally unbalance very intricate narrative constructs. The subtle doom that hangs over the series is dampened when Kelly Sheridan misses the yearning melancholy that haunts Hachi's monologues, and too many of the series' aching episode-end (and -beginning) transitions are knocked askew by glitches in timing. Little things, but cumulative in their effect.

For extras fun: a dialogue-free version of one of the concert set-pieces.

It becomes a kind of reflex to j
udge anime series based on their entertainment value. But NANA reminds us that anime can be much more than mere diversion, more than anesthesia for whatever pain plagues your life. There's a quality to it, an elusive, rare and yet familiar quality. A quality that you can sense in the redemptive mysticism of Haibane Renmei, feel it in the cruel psychological poetry of Hideaki Anno, see it in moral ambivalence of Koi Kaze. Honesty, realism, insight—these are but weak synonyms for it: Truth. NANA may not quite be sister to those wonders—it is just a hair too concerned with dramatic convention to violently shatter the mold the way they do—but it has that quality, and with it becomes something more than entertainment: Art.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A
Story : A+
Animation : A
Art : A
Music : A

+ Heightens the intensity of an already flawless adult drama; the Nana+Nana bond.
− Character designs are an acquired taste.

As what first seemed an opportunistic one-night stand with Takumi blossoms into a decidedly warped relationship, it drives a wedge between Hachi and Nana. Nana hates the long-haired bastard and she can't bear the sight of them together. The alienation is forestalled when Hachi's flighty little heart flits to another, less icky flower, but the respite doesn't last long. Life drops a bomb on poor Hachi, one with enough megatonnage to level Nana's life too. As the two drift farther apart, BLAST is offered its first record contract and Nana throws herself into her work. But the bond they formed remains, no matter the events that conspire to cleave it. Whether it will support them as their search for fulfillment takes them in opposite directions or lay them both low is something only time will tell.

Review:

If you hate Hachi with the heat of a thousand suns, the second half of NANA will only stoke the inferno. In twenty-plus episodes it maps out, in ugly and exacting detail, the evolution of a course of action

that would by most standards be unforgivably mercenary. Hachi is the main player and it culminates in a decision that could, if you were kindly disposed, be called self-serving. It's a chain of events that seems almost tailor-made to turn Hachi-haters away from the series.

Which is a pity, since turning away means missing one of anime's great narrative feats: the forceful insertion of audiences into the head and heart of a girl who must make one of the most universally reviled decisions in the cinematic repertoire. It is, not to give too much away, a move that has been variously villainized, scorned, and pitied. But the brilliance of NANA, and Ai Yazawa, is that they put us so far into the life and mind of Hachi, delineate her thoughts and feelings so precisely and humanely, that her decision seems not tragic or small-hearted but mature, genuinely painful...even heroic. It's a work of masterful emotional and cinematic manipulation, almost Hitchcockian in its perversion of audience identification, but more human—and more heartbreaking—than much of what the Master produced.

And it's not even the greatest of the series' qualifications for greatness. At least, not clearly. The clearest victor is still the Nana/Nana relationship, a bond as difficult to summate as it is unique. It would be tempting to say that Ai Yazawa invented a heretofore unknown relationship for the two, were it not for the note of pure truth the relationship sounds when struck with a stressor. It wasn't invented so much as discovered, or more accurately, extrapolated from real life. Brilliantly, painfully so. The stressor, for the curious, is that fateful decision of Hachi's, which rends their friendship asunder, sending echoes of the tearing rippling all the way to the series' final, ambiguous moments.

With the tearing, around the end of set three, focus shifts a little more to the Nana side of Yazawa's tapestry. And with the shifting comes the music. Not in the soundtrack—though director Morio Asaka's sparing, incisive use of ominously ascending strings and modern rock is a goosebump-raising treat—but in the lives of the story's characters. Like everything on the series' broad but intensely personal canvas, the musical lives of Nana and her cohorts (and enemies) are complex, powerful, and above all, real. The nasty, cutthroat vortex of muddily intermingling business, mass media and art would make an excellent series in its own right, even before it intersects with the masochistic, morally compromised romances of Hachi and the trauma of her dangerous untwining from Nana.

You don't need to be susceptible to the rock mythos to enjoy the behind-the-music turn the series takes, but it helps. Particularly in appreciating the glamorous, dangerous sheen the musical myth-making adds to the series' last leg. It also pays to be up on your rock history. Knowing who the Sex Pistols and Sid Vicious are is a necessity, and knowing what Yasu's ownership of Incesticide says about his musical influences or what Reira's fondness for "Layla" says about hers is nice, if not imperative.

And holding all this together—unflinching emotional realism, high-gloss rock 'n roll living, localized Tokyo milieu—is Morio Asaka. Asaka isn't an auteur in the individualistic, fiercely artistic sense that directors like Hideaki Anno or Satoshi Kon are. But neither is he some studio hack. You don't turn out series like Cardcaptor Sakura by being a nepotistic parasite. What Asaka is, is an expert and flexible craftsman. One need only listen to him evoke a previous episode's climax with a few strums of an acoustic guitar, or watch how his transitions link scenes even as they comment—sometimes wryly, sometimes sadly, sometimes forcefully—on the events they conjoin, to appreciate the power and nuance he brings to the tale he tells.

Most viewers will probably want to watch NANA subbed. That isn't to say that Viz's dub is sub-par, or that it hasn't been improving. It isn't the former and certainly has been the latter. As their roles have grown, most of the supporting cast has risen to the task, delivering consistently good and consistently faithful performances while the leads all stay strong. The dub even dodges a potentially hairy bullet with its solid, toned-down (and irritatingly uncredited) take on BLAST's flamboyantly gay manager. But again, the English actors are faced with a monster Japanese cast that includes a goodly proportion of the cream of the

seiyuu crop, and no matter how you cut it they haven't the same emotional range. Think of it as the Polish mounted cavalry facing down the Blitzkrieg: valiant, commendable, and doomed. Which lends the already likeable cast an additional underdog charm. So, not a total loss.

Other than a pretty cool animated music video for one of the opening/BLAST songs on the fourth set, there are no extras of note on these releases.

There is a certain danger in championing NANA's artistic merit. Doing so can give the false impression that the show is best appreciated by cinematic eggheads. While the eggheads will find much to appreciate, particularly on multiple viewings, it isn't so high-minded that it forgets its primary purpose as entertainment. It takes refuge from the punishing strength of its emotions in rueful humor, and the thrilling, kinetic concert set-pieces bespeak a series thoroughly versed in the appeal of pure spectacle. Even the truths it speaks, about the spaces that separate people and the terrors and delights of bridging them, are components in a vicarious web of emotion rather than sterile observations to be appreciated for their intellectual acuity. The honest internal discussions, the silences pregnant with meaning, the germs of truth, the meticulously interwoven plots, the raggedly real characters, the powerful yet terrifyingly delicate central relationship, the deliberate spurning of distaff fantasies—everything that separates NANA from its peers is there, not for intellectuals to mind-wank to, but to fill us all so full of sadness, joy, regret and, yes, love that it leaks from our tear ducts. Surrender yourself to it; you won't regret it.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A+
Story : A
Animation : A
Art : A
Music : A

+ Ambitious, wickedly smart, brutally honest, and artistically accomplished—the finest romantic drama to come down the pike in a long, long time.
− Not everyone will appreciate having to immerse themselves in Hachi's thoughts and feelings; not for the kiddies or the anime=ninjas crowd.

Moribito - Guardian of the Spirit (2011-06-23 22:37)

With the first four episodes of Moribito, Production I.G does to fantasy anime series what they did to hard-core sci-fi anime with Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex a couple of years earlier: use a combination of impressive technical merits, excellent storytelling, and a compelling lead character to set a new standard for the genre. Never has a fantasy anime series looked better, and rarely has one been more involving. That its Adult Swim broadcast has not been very successful so far is a shame, as those avoiding it because it does not have the high-octane feel of a Bleach or Code Geass are doing themselves a disservice.

The series gets off to a rousing start with a fantastic opener which combines "Shine," one of fan-fave L'Arc-en-Ciel's best songs, with a sampling of the series' gorgeous artistry and animation. (For those who have been following the series only via the Adult Swim broadcasts, the broadcast version of the opener is slightly truncated.) If any further proof of the series' sterling artistic merits is needed, the very first scene delivers a panoramic shot of a mountain range that is so breathtaking that it should be used as a textbook example of how to draw mountains in animation. Throughout these four episodes Production I.G piles on

one fabulous-looking scene after another; even in the mundane details the series shines, and the shots of palatial opulence rival the best anime has to offer. Every detail, from costuming to elaborate building design to even depictions of rice patties, impresses, and even minor visual flaws or drop-offs in quality are few and far between. Rich use of color and lighting effects, whether from a sunny late afternoon, a stormy night, or even underwater, distinguish the series amongst any competition. Though character designs sometimes stray a little too much into caricatures, they nonetheless show the same quality and attention to detail.

Such great artistry would still struggle without good animation to support it, but the series shines here, too. Short cuts are infrequent, or at least less obvious, and the few true fight scenes are things of beauty. Characters move, dodge, and thrust with great smoothness and alacrity, creating convincingly dynamic fights filled with motion and an all-too-frequently-absent sense of danger; the highlight four-on-one fight scene from episode 3 may, in fact, stand amongst the year's best. These are fights not fueled by ridiculous displays of skill or super-human powers, but ones ground in reality. The production team threw in a few neat 3D tricks for good measure, but these episodes look plenty good enough without the extra gimmicks.

The series has much more than just a great opener and technical merits in its favor. In Balsa, Moribito offers a fully credible heroine, a woman in her late 20s who is attractive in a vaguely ethnic way (but not distractingly so) and has the kind of solid, powerful build one would expect of a true warrior. She is very skilled, capable, and practical, a woman good at thinking on her feet and taking charge of a situation without being needlessly arrogant or flashy. Unlike so many of her anime contemporaries, she does not exist to be ogled, but to do her job and do it both completely and well while coping with her own demons. She is such a refreshing change of pace that the series would be worth watching for her alone. Chagum, her charge, is well-crafted as a privileged young boy who quickly realizes the dire nature of the situation and that he must adapt to the circumstances if her wants to survive; the inbred arrogance of his former position gradually gets set aside. Madame Torogai, the old witch who serves as the series' obligatory colorful character, does not have enough screen time in this volume for her eccentricities to fully establish themselves, and key player Tanda also has little chance to reveal his character or past with Balsa by the end of episode 4. Long-haired Shuga shows some promise as the astrologer-insider, while the children Saya and Touya distinguish themselves less but still have better-defined personalities than the norm for being minor recurring characters.

Even these elements in a series' favor can still ultimately fail without proper support from the writing, but this volume has no concerns there, either. Based on a novel by Nahoko Uehashi, the story grounds itself in a setting heavily influenced by medieval China yet offering enough of its own novel twists to distinguish itself as something unique. This is a story and setting which dabbles with mysticism and the supernatural without being dominated by it or, indeed, even making a big deal about it. The story it tells about the need to safeguard a special boy despite deadly threats against him is a staple of sci fi, fantasy, and action titles around the world, and in many senses the basic plot strongly resembles that of Scrapped Princess, but the quality here lies in the details and story execution. The Mikado and his servants are not painted as heartless villains, but instead people reluctantly carrying out what they see as an onerous and unfortunate duty, while Balsa is crafted as a powerful figure and yet is not above serious harm. The writing smoothly works in many details about the well-defined setting without yet resorting to any kind of info dump and tantalizes with hints about the past. It finds novel ways to present and carry out daunting tasks, such as the slimy, slippery rocky ridge Chagum must traverse in a rain storm to fetch help for a gravely-wounded Balsa in episode 3 or the water rescue in episode 1. Perhaps most importantly, it has smart characters consistently taking sensible actions, something woefully lacking in the many prominent series which depend on a parade of idiocy to aggrandize their heroes. Moribito does not need to do that to carry out its story, and thus never stoops that low.

Although the opener may be the soundtrack's shining gem, it is hardly the music's only strong

point. Original closer “Itoshii Hito e” by Sachi Tainaka, which does not air during the Adult Swim broadcasts since it only has translated Japanese credits, is a lovely matching of song and visuals in its own right, while an adaptation of one of the soundtrack themes is used for the English credits closer which does play at the end of the Adult Swim broadcasts (and appears here at the end of the volume). The music in between peaks with the intense, pounding rhythms used during the dramatic battle in episode 3 but serves the production well throughout. Good use of background sound and an especially good 5.1 mix – listening to this series in 2.0 does not do it justice – further complement the sound production.

Bang Zoom! Entertainment does its usual solid job in assembling a worthy cast for the English dub. Cindy Robinson’s voice and delivery style may not be a perfect match for Mabuki Andou’s fine original performance, but she has a deep, slightly rumbly feminine voice that suits Balsa quite well and gives her a convincing sense of age, competence, and authority. It may take sub fans a little while to get used to, but they should definitely give it a chance. Mona Marshall, by comparison, is dead-on with the original performance in crafting a proper voice for Chagum. The supporting cast varies a bit more, with long-time veteran Barbara Goodson as Madame Torogai being a highlight and Peter Doyle’s Tanda sounding a bit flat and uninteresting, but generally it hits the mark. The English script finds a satisfying balance between accuracy and smooth flow.

The first volume, which is available separately or in the combo pack with the second volume, offers nothing significant for Extras, though it does have both 2.0 and 5.1 sound tracks. Notably, the menu art is decidedly inferior to anything in the actual animation.

Some have complained about the pacing of Moribito being a bit on the slow and deliberate side, but that does not show as much in this span of episodes as it does in some later ones. This block chugs along quite nicely, offering a fair share of action scenes and intrigue to complement its thoughtful, well-paced storytelling. All-in-all, it is an exceptionally strong start to a highly promising series.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A
Overall (sub) : A
Story : A
Animation : A-
Art : A
Music : A-

+ Gorgeous artistry, excellent fight scenes, strong heroine, rich storytelling.
− Pacing may be a little too slow and deliberate for some, no Extras.

Life undercover for Balsa and Chagum means dealing with the mundane aspects of Yogoan life, but given the individuals involved, even the mundane aspects can have greater complications. When Saya passes out and falls into a deep sleep in the wake of a marriage arrangement, Tanda must go on a spirit walk to call her back, only to find it difficult for him to return. Later, Chagum gets drawn into an arranged fight with a tough visiting boy during a local festival, an affair which eventually involves Balsa, too. The incident draws unwanted attention, however, in the form of a man from Balsa’s past who bears a deep grudge over a past defeat. When he threatens to involve innocent bystanders, Balsa is left with no choice but to become a tiger and confront him.

Review:

Lesson learned from this volume: forcing Balsa into a situation where she actually has to try to kill someone is a really, really bad idea for her foe.

After nearly eight months of delays and repeating the first 10 episodes twice (a practice that newer anime fans may not realize used to be commonplace for Cartoon Network/Adult Swim), Adult Swim is finally starting to broadcast the rest of Moribito. For those who could not wait, or preferred a hard copy with the full opener and original closer intact, there's always DVD volume four, which covers episodes 11-13. Sadly, the first three new episodes in quite some time have the feel of filler about them.

In fact, if "filler" content is defined as content which tells stories not drawn from the source material, then these three episodes are exactly that. While they touch on some things described in the original novel – such as what Nayugu looks like or Balsa's commitment to not taking any life – these are entirely original tales. Calling them "mundane" would not entirely be accurate, since one does involve spirit-walking and another contains a very dynamic fight scene, but none of these three episodes are more than very peripherally involved with the overall plot. Those waiting to get back to the quests of Star Reader Shuga and Madame Torogai to find out what is going on with the egg inside Chagum will apparently have to wait for episode 14 in volume 5.

As filler stories go, though, each episode has its own appeal. Episode 11 focuses as much on the relationships of the series' two main couples (Balsa and Tanda, Toya and Saya) as on the spirit-walking Tanda must do save Saya; one simple but great scene shows Chagum glancing at Balsa and Tanda knowingly after having Toya and Saya's potential relationship spelled out for him. Episode 12, by contrast, is more of a setting-building exercise in the way it details a prominent festival and the different ways city and rural folk celebrate it. Episode 13 shifts the series back into action mode, returning to the fluid, vibrant, intense fight choreography which was one of the series' early hallmarks. The allusions to a warrior assuming the spirit of a tiger (and the dangers thereof) take on a more fascinating dimension when the series shows an unusually fierce Balsa briefly but literally taking on the aspect of a tiger. The effect the incident has on Balsa also makes the episode noteworthy.

As it showed in its earliest episodes, Moribito is practically in a visual league of its own. This is Production I.G's artistic masterpiece; no other anime fantasy series ever made even comes close to equaling the richness of its backgrounds and character renderings or the energy and sense of movement portrayed in its action scenes. The series is not shy about using character designs that are distinctly ugly, yet even those are drawn exceptionally well. Even its opening animation, complete with a wonderfully-detailed scene of a flock of birds taking off from a pond and a gorgeous shot of an eagle soaring into sunlight-colored clouds, shows off this title's artistic excellence.

While the soundtrack is not quite as overwhelming as the artistry, it is still effective and distinctive, with its moody numbers and deep, resonating recurring themes. The wonderful L'Arc-en-Ciel opener continues through this run in full form (rather than the trimmed-down version shown on Adult Swim), while the original closer skipped over in the American TV broadcasts has been restored with intact Japanese credits; English credits follow at the end of the volume using the theme that serves as the broadcast's closer.

The Bang Zoom! dub continues to be solid (if unexceptional), with Cindy Robinson as Balsa and Mona Marshall as Chagum firmly anchoring the cast in the key roles and newcomer Amy Johnson ably serving in a key episode 13 guest role as a traveling teacher. Other performances are generally at least adequate. The English script varies a bit in some places but not in any meaningful way.

Although Media Blasters is selling this one at a lower price point, they still are offering only three

episodes with no Extras for an MSRP of $24.99 – an outdated practice in the current market and definitely not a good value compared to most other releases over the past couple of years that did not have Bandai Visual somewhere on them. This volume is also available in a two-pack with vol. 3 for a better per-episode value, however. Conspicuously absent is any translation of the text inscribed on the mountainside in certain scenes in episode 13, which is one of this episode's coolest background visuals.

The one strike often laid against Moribito is that it progresses rather slowly, and this volume does nothing to allay that concern. The series is clearly stalling at this point to fill up 26 episodes for a novel not originally long enough to directly support more than 12 or 13. Even with expanding certain aspects of the story, it still drags a bit through this run. Still, it looks great, sounds good, and does its job well in world-building and character development departments. That should be enough to sustain fans until the meat of the main story returns.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : B+
Animation : A
Art : A
Music : B+

+ Top-rate series artistry and animation, superb fight scene.
− Filler stories which only peripherally involve the main plot, no Extras.

Madame Torogai and Shuga each independently discover that the official history of New Yogo has obscured the truth about the Nyunga Ro Im, leading the former to uncover a deadly threat to Chagum which lurks in Nayug and the latter to find evidence that Chagum is still alive. A chance encounter leads to more perilous conflict as the Mikado's Hunters pursue Balsa and Chagum on their fact-finding mission to an isolated Yaku village, after which Balsa's group and Shuga's forces eventually come to an understanding: the prince is to be protected by Balsa while Shuga continues to look for clues in New Yogo's long-concealed true history about what, exactly, Chagum needs to do and how the dreadful Egg-Eater Ra Runga can be fended off, allowing the egg within Chagum to be born without killing Chagum. During a long winter in hiding, Chagum toughens up, learns to fight from Balsa, and finally hears the truth about Balsa's past with Jiguro. As the fateful day approaches, Balsa's group, Shuga, and the Hunters must all band together to oppose the Ra Runga and give Chagum a chance to complete his purpose. Staving off the upcoming drought, and thus the fate of the Empire, hangs in the balance.

Review:

As Moribito begins its second half, it leaves behind the flirtation with filler content which dominated the previous few episodes and gets back to its core plot: figuring out what, exactly, must be done with the mystical egg within Prince Chagum and what role he must play in helping to avoid the upcoming drought. The only distraction from this course is a two episode flashback arc detailing Balsa's past with Jiguro, but it is so well-executed and plays so directly into Balsa's underlying motivations for what she is doing in the current time that no one should have issue with it. In fact, "execution" is the word of the day for the series as a whole; no fantasy anime series made to date brings all of its story elements and production aspects together better than Moribito does, especially in its second half.

Such a grandiose statement may sound like hyperbole, but that is only true if the series cannot back up such a claim. This one can. Moribito is, without question, one of the best-looking anime series of any type ever made. It is Production I.G's visual masterpiece, complete with rich coloring, distinctive and beautifully-rendered character designs that even convincingly de-age characters (and my, wasn't Balsa a cutie at younger ages!), gorgeous selections of background art, and even inventive critter designs when dealing with the Ra Runga, important birds, and other spirits from Nayug. The artistry consistently stays on model, never showing the flaws that most other series eventually do, and even integrates its occasional use of CG effects very smoothly, which is an important consideration given the presence of some massed troop movement scenes. Its animation is crisp and smoothly-flowing, including dynamic and fully-detailed fight scenes that, surprisingly, never take shortcuts. That Production I.G was able to create a movie-grade effort on a series budget is, frankly, astonishing.

Its fully orchestrated musical score is the only aspect of the series which is not brilliant, but even so it does its job very well. Scenes that are supposed to be intense never lack for intensity, and the deep, resonating beats suit the tone of the series well. Prominent towards the end is an insert song intended to represent a Yaku children's song relevant to the plot, which provides a nice complement to critical late scenes.

Even the most impressive visuals and music would not matter much if the story and writing were not there, but that is another of Moribito's strengths. This is a story with two distinct angles: one is the relationship that Balsa forms with Chagum and her motivations behind what she does, the other is the unraveling of a mystical puzzle whose true nature has been blurred by history. Both aspects can fascinate. Balsa's stern but caring and devoted treatment of Chagum established her as a motherly figure for Chagum earlier in the series, a dynamic which continues to allow Chagum to grow as a person and gives him the strength to face the deadly trials that befall him late in the series. Moreso than before, certain key scenes give the impression that Balsa's protection of Chagum is much more than just a job; it is a solemn commitment, the same kind that Jiguro made towards her when he took on the damning task of having to protect her during her childhood; as that two-episode arc plays out, the parallels between Balsa's childhood situation and Chagum's become increasingly clear, which also makes it absolutely clear why she took on this task in the first place and why she is reluctant to kill.

The mystical puzzle surrounding the Nyunga Ro Im never gets lost alongside that character development. As these episodes progress, the story deals with issues like history being falsified for political purposes and the way that vital old traditions can die out over time when one culture is absorbed into another. It also deals with how seemingly innocuous current traditions can provide vital clues to important events of the past. Too many series make these discoveries too easy; watching characters have to work for it, and figure things out on the fly based on past knowledge, is a treat.

Just as important as the mysteries being sorted out here and the relationships being built is the intelligence on display. Unlike so many other fantasy stories out there (or anime series in general, for that matter), these characters actually think things out and carefully strategize rather than just jumping into rash action; the warriors' assault on the mill early in this block of episodes is a perfect example of this. Sure, they sometimes act in ways that ultimately prove counterproductive, but that is nearly always from a lack of knowledge rather than recklessness. They are even willing to admit when mistakes have been made and change their viewpoints accordingly, which ultimately leaves no true villain in the story except the dreadful Ra Runga.

Bang Zoom! provided the English dub, and while it is not one of that institution's finest efforts, it is good enough to minimize quality drop-off from the Japanese dub. Cindy Robinson handles both old Balsa and young Balsa's emotional moments well and generally gives a convincing feeling of competence, experience, and motherly guidance to her role while still getting suitably intense when Balsa gets riled up. Barbara Goodson gives one of her career-best performances as crotchety old Torogai (and that's saying a lot,

given that she has one of the longest anime voicing careers of any active VA), while Mona Marshall impresses as Chagum and Steve Cannon is solid as Shuga. In fact, the only major role which is even questionable is Peter Doyle's less-than-completely-smooth cadence as Touya. Secondary roles vary in performance quality but generally do not disappoint.

Media Blasters is one of the few companies that is not Viz Media still not only resolutely continuing to release series as singles, but doing so mostly with three-episode singles, a practice common in the first half of the decade but rarely-seen these days. Those with a bit of patience along the way could have picked up the Two-Pack sets, which bundle volumes 5-6 and 7-8, at the same time as the second volume in each pair and for a 30 % reduction in price; in fact, if you are going back now and buying up the series, there is no point whatsoever in buying the singles instead of the Two-Packs unless you only happen to need one of those volumes. Sadly, none of the volumes offer any Extras.

Some may still complain about the pacing here, but now that the filler episodes have passed the story is too involving, and too many things are going on, for that criticism to have much legitimacy. Besides, those looking for a more dedicated action fantasy probably gave up many episodes earlier anyway. This is not a fantasy action series, but a true and full-blooded fantasy series at its finest. It even does a superb job of taking the more bare-bones original novel by Nahoko Uehashi and expanding it by enriching the characterizations and more thoroughly exploring the setting. Some details do get changed along the way – Chagum's relationship with his brother Sagum is entirely different in the book, for instance, and there was only one Ra Runga – but no one who read the book is likely to complain about how director Kenji Kamiyama handled things here. The end result makes this one of the decade's highlight anime series.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A
Overall (sub) : A
Story : A
Animation : A
Art : A
Music : A-

+ Top-of-the-line series artistry, animation, and storytelling, improves on source material.
− No Extras.

Hoping MtG phenomenon isn't "do or die" (2011-06-27 12:14)

I hate that income sucking Magic the Gathering (drug addiction sucking) overthrown poker, uno, blackjack, Crabs, golf, solitaire, chess, checkers, Battleship, Connect 4, risk, monopoly, Mahjongg, Sudoku, Jenga, sports cards, Yahtzee, and most videogames phenomenon

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1.6 July

About (2011-07-01 11:02)

I started watching in 2010. After the unusual treatment I received via silence from my conventional 1100 post American culture journal on blogspot/wordpress, I decided upon an anime Japanese approach to meet

new people; whereby having more comments. I might be able to emulate pursuit of happiness in this fashion.

myanimelist.net/profile/renegadeviking

Education Level: healthcare management bachelor degree

Anime Likes: Mecha-anime, science fiction,

Anime Dislikes: anime from the 1980s, low budget anime (Pokemon, Digimon)

Other Likes: Roger Ebert, IGN, economic liberalism, Cats, Dogs, Blogging, pizza, Gatorade, pasta, serria mist, sprite, Italian foods, waffles, hamburger soup, Tomato soup, Pelmeni, pasta, chicken alfredo, Spaghetti, Fedelini, Capellini, Agnolotti, Cannelloni, Lazonia, Beef Stroganoff

Other Dislikes: Stress, marxism-leninism (reads), Democratic Party, chocolate cake

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Clannad (2011-07-01 21:11)

High school student Tomoya is a delinquent who thinks nothing of cutting class and typically wiles his time away with fellow delinquent (and playboy wannabe) Sunohara. A poor family situation leaves him apathetic towards everything until a chance meeting with Nagisa, a girl a year older who happens to be repeating because of a lengthy illness the previous year. Nagisa wants to find a way to revive the school's Drama Club, an effort Tomoya allows himself to be drawn into. Along the way he associates with several other cute girls, including the fortune-telling class rep Ryou, Ryou's aggressive older sister Kyou, the martial kicking specialist Tomoyo, socially stunted genius Kotomi, and Fuko, a small girl enamored with starfish. The latter seems both obsessed with, and tremendously earnest about, handing out wooden carvings of starfish as invitations to the upcoming wedding of her sister (a former teacher at the school), although Tomoya and Nagisa soon learn that there's something strange about her that goes well beyond that. That doesn't stop them, and to lesser degrees the others, from supporting Fuko's cause to the end, however. Later it's Kotomi's turn for the Tomoya Development Treatment, during which she reveals both a curious "talent" for the violin and a wealth of deep-seeded issues resulting from her own family situation.

Review:

If Air was Key/Visual Art's summer-themed visual novel-to-anime translation, and Kanon was its winter-themed production, Clannad is its spring-themed production. Aside from the seasonal change, the only major difference between it and its predecessors is that it started as an all-ages production rather than being adapted into one from an erotic version, and that is really only a background factor. Otherwise it just offers more of the same well-proven recipe that has made Key/Visual Art's productions into fan favorites: take a mischievous but basically good-hearted guy, surround him with cute but highly dysfunctional girls whose problems he must solve one by one, throw in a few eccentric adults and side characters, flavor it with supernatural elements, and then drown it in moe sauce. Cook in the oven at 375 degrees for an hour, and voila! Another adorable wonder for moe fans to gorge themselves upon.

And really, if you don't have at least a tolerance for moe content then this series, like the others, is absolutely not for you. Key/Visual Art's and Kyoto Animation have had three series now to tweak and tune their recipe to maximum effect, and it shows. Every action and nuance of each major female character, down to the slightest detail, is carefully fashioned to endear the characters to the viewer and inspire those protective feelings that can give moe series such a strong draw. Though none of the female characters have (yet) shown a signature sound effect, each has some other adorable affectation peculiar to her: Nagisa names favorite foods when excited and is enamored with a cutesy anime called Big Dango Family, Kotomi is constantly concerned about whether or not other characters are going to bully her, Fuko gets euphorically dazed when contemplating her beloved starfish, Kyou is shaping up to be the classic tsundere (i.e. tough on the outside, soft at the core) type, Tomoyo can kick those who attack her hundreds of times in a single action, and so forth. Even the way they move and speak tries to invoke the kind of heart-warming lovableness that powers moe titles.

Of course, this can be done to overkill, and Clannad constantly flirts with crossing that line. Not every girl needs to be deeply troubled, sickly, a projected spirit, or have some other psychological and/or supernatural hang-up for such a title to be entertaining, but apparently normal girls are too mundane for such an exercise. For all the practical jokes he plays, Tomoya is entirely too nice, making him practically a carbon-copy of Yuichi from Kanon. (He does, of course, have his own Big Issue, but that has not become a major plot point yet.)

The structure of the story so far is virtually identical to the equivalent episodes in Kanon: spend the first few episodes introducing the cast, setting, and circumstances, generally piddle around as the male lead hooks up with one of the female characters as an ongoing thing, then gradually start cycling through the other girls and their issues. Fuko gets the first treatment, followed by Kotomi, whose story is steadily building as the release ends. These individual stories do, of course, slowly progress towards a big emotional payoff, and that is where the series works its greatest magic. No matter how jaded you might try to be about what the writing is obviously doing, and no matter how many times you might roll your eyes at the inanity of it all, the climaxes of Fuko's storyline can still hit home with sudden and surprisingly effective emotional intensity. Those prone to sentimentality should not watch the second half of episode 9 without some tissue handy.

The other element which makes the series tolerable as it meanders towards its emotional apexes is its humor. Like Kanon, the first half of Clannad can, at times, be quite funny. Sunohara is practically pure comedy relief, as are the occasional game effects, and the gags that Tomoya pulls at the expense of various characters he associates with (especially Fuko) are sometimes priceless. Also watch for a surprise guest appearance in episode 12 that doesn't go quite the way you might expect but is nonetheless perfectly in character.

The look of the series is very similar to that of Kanon, save that it has a somewhat flatter color scheme by comparison. (The school uniforms, which have a more mundane design and muted color, could be the chief culprit on this.) All of the female character designs are moe to the max, and while male designs are more typical, they still have their own appeal and distinctiveness. The backgrounds convey a vague sense of warmth and coziness, save in the scenes in Tomoya's house – a doubtless intentional effect – and watch for some special coloring effects, especially at the beginning. The animation takes some shortcuts but is generally of the quality fandom has come to expect from Kyoto Animation. As with its predecessors, more prurient fan service is almost non-existent.

As good as the series looks, only in the key emotional scenes does its soundtrack make much of an impact, though it works quite well in those cases. Most of the rest of the time it provides a succession of humdrum musical numbers that sound like they were lifted from the background score for a dating sim. Its opener by eufonius, whose other credits include theme songs for Noein and Kashimashi, is of a similar style to the openers for both Air and Kanon, while the closer "Dango Daikozu" by Chata is the same song Nagisa occasionally signs from her Big Dango Family anime. While it may seem silly at first, it can grow on you.

Clannad is another series actually licensed by Sentai Filmworks but processed by ADV personnel. Like Princess Resurrection, it offers no English dub and nothing for Extras beyond a clean opener and closer on the first of two disks. It does, however, offer a plethora of on-screen translation notes to explain certain terms and fine points of language that do not translate well. Sadly, the subtitles are not entirely free of grammatical glitches and some minor irregularities in the sound mixing might be noticed by astute listeners watching it on a surround-sound set-up. (The narration sometimes sounds as if it comes from the wrong speaker, for instance.)

Spread throughout the first dozen episodes are several introductory bits involving a girl alone in a world and a being who comes to inhabit a Frankenstein-like robot to be with her. What, if anything, these scenes actually have to do with the rest of the series have not even been hinted at yet, so that and the truth behind Kotomi's apparently severe circumstances will have to wait for the next volume. Those who enjoy these stories about a kind-hearted guy helping out broken and secretly damaged moe girls will not need that impetus to continue on, however. This series already offers nearly everything such individuals could possibly want.

Overall (sub) : B
Story : B
Animation : B+
Art : B+
Music : C+

\+ Humor, occasional intensely emotional moments, a moe fan's dream.
− Lack of an English dub, sometimes tedious, flirts with overkill on the moe elements.

Noein - To your other self (2011-07-01 22:52)

Summer break means fun and relaxation for many sixth-graders in Hokadate, but for Yu it means intense studying and cram school forced upon him by a mother obsessed with seeing him test into a middle school in Tokyo. Even his friends are ultimately not allowed to visit him lest he be distracted. But strange things are afoot surrounding him and especially his best friend Haruka, with whom he has considered running away. Ghostly images appear and vanish before her and time occasionally stops around her as individuals claiming

to be from another dimension seem intent on kidnapping her. They claim she is something called a Dragon Torque, which is critical for stabilizing their own dimension in a future time frame, and indeed Haruka does seem capable of manifesting such an item, one linked to a mysterious entity known only as Noein, and using some incredible powers. What's more, one of the images claims to be an alternate future version of Yu, and not all of them seem to agree on the proper course of action; some want the Dragon Torque dead instead.

Meanwhile two agents from a secretive group repeatedly keep running into Haruka and company as they try to track down the source of strange energy readings around Hokadate, ones which may have everything to do with the dimensional travelers and Dragon Torque.

Review:

In one sense Noein is a typical example of a series embedding a "the girl has special powers that make her a target" gimmick into a slice-of-life story focusing on elementary school kids, the kind of thing we've seen done innumerable times before. Sure, it's considerably more serious than such series normally are, and like the recent Fantastic Children it doesn't feel like it was written with kids in mind despite the mostly-youthful cast, but the core elements are there. To evaluate the series on that basis, though, would be to ignore how truly weird its sci-fi elements actually are and how obfuscated its underlying plot is through its first five episodes. The short and simple version is that a lot of messy business about alternate dimensions, dimensional transference, and dimension-hopping is involved.

The essence of the plot concerns efforts by a group of Dragon Cavalry to protect an alternate dimension called La'cryma, which exists 15 years down the timeline and is in danger of collapsing due to "corrosion" from something called Shangri-La. Their forays into the current-time world are difficult and dangerous, but must be done to obtain something they call the Dragon Torque, which is supposed to be able to stabilize their dimension, and this girl Haruka seems to be it. Indeed, an average of once an episode a torque which looks like a dragon biting its tail appears around her neck and in a great ring in the sky. When they appear weird things can happen, like time stopping, dimensional shifts to correct some catastrophe, a mysterious person speaking to her whom others can't see or hear, and so forth. By implication, Haruka and this torque (or, perhaps more precisely, this Noein individual behind the torque) may be responsible for La'cryma ending up in the sorry state that it's in, but the volume ends with a possibly more comprehensive explanation of the situation pending. Not helping matters is that it takes all of the first five episodes to even piece together this much, and that still leaves viewers without any insight as to why these two adults are investigating energy readings on behalf of an organization called the Absolute Critical Prevention Strategic Committee, whose ridiculously long name seems like just an excuse for the much cooler abbreviation "Ab-Com."

The series isn't all about its action-laden sci-fi elements, however. Much of the content focuses on the very ordinary activities and circumstances of 6th grade kids, whether it's a slapfest between two girls provoked by jealousy over a boy, experimenting with a Ouija board, going out "ghost-hunting" over summer break, or dealing with a friend who's become a virtual prisoner due to his enforced studying and cramming for an upcoming entrance exam. The extreme stress Yu is being put under, and the negative effect it's having on him, lends a darker and edgier side to what is otherwise occasionally light-hearted slice-of-life content. His prominent use of a utility knife only furthers the impression that he is a boy on the edge, and the alternate-dimension man named Karasu, who claims to be a future version of Yu, isn't helping matters by telling Yu that there's nothing he can really do to protect Haruka or keep her from fading away, but hey, he should try anyway. Further making things interesting is the insane Atori, another of the Dragon Cavalry who comes to believe that Haruka, as the Dragon Torque, would be better off dead than captured.

What really distinguishes Noein from other series is its look. Character designs step beyond typical

anime stylistic elements, creating designs that are sometimes familiar-looking but more often very distinctly different, especially in the way lips are drawn for women and cloaked figures of the Dragon Cavalry; Atori's appearance in particular is an embodiment of his mental instability. The styling at times gives a distinctly manga-art feel, as if the artists were just directly animating manga panels rather than redrawing them, and this is furthered by regular use of manga-styled shading lines on character's faces. This effect is doubtless intended to give a feeling of how the Dragon Cavalry members are disconnected from normal reality when they move to the current-time dimension, and if that is the goal, the series succeeds at it quite well.

A lot of CG work has gone into this one, whether it's animating vehicles and water waves, depicting a giant Ouroboros-shaped portal, animating a giant alien ship, or playing around with its frequent perspective-shifting shots. The 2D animation is good enough that normal movements look smooth and lend effect energy to its dynamic, high-strung fight scenes. The 2D/CG integration isn't flawless, but it's one of the better efforts to date outside of a Gonzo production. Kudos to Satelight for producing one of the year's more distinctive and memorable looks.

The fully orchestrated musical score certainly doesn't lack for dramatic flair during the more dramatic scenes, even slightly overdoing it at times. The opener and closer are both pleasant enough numbers but neither is especially memorable. More impressive is the English dub, which feels right on the mark. Every performance hits the right tone, effectively conveying scenes with appropriate emotion and flair suitable to English speaking style, and most of the voices are very good matches. The English voice of Haruka's friend Ai sounds a little raspy, but that's a minor complaint, and the accent given to the female Ab-Com agent is handled well. The script stays close enough that it shouldn't generate major complaints, although its choice of words in some places is debatable.

Despite five episodes, Manga Entertainment has also included a significant number of Extras. The most prominent is the 14-minute first installment of a travelogue about the real-life Hakodate featuring the Japanese director and lead seiyuu, who explore various locations used as the artistic inspiration for settings in the series. Watching this makes one appreciate exactly how much attention to real-world detail went into accurately depicting the settings, even for minor scenes. Also included are two alternate openers, clean opener and closer, and Japanese promos. In an unusual move, not only does the disk include both regular and Dolby 5.1 versions of both the English and Japanese language tracks, but it also includes Spanish subtitle options in addition to American ones. It also features some of the more user-friendly and easy-to-navigate menu designs. The case itself also comes inside a foil-embossed slip cover. Somewhat tacky is the quoting from "fan reviews" on the cover, which naturally sounds like overblown hype.

While the fan review comments go overboard, Noein does have enough going on to draw one in and hold one's interest. It is not a series you can watch idly, as it is a bit deeper and a lot more involved than it may appear to be at first. An interesting visual style, edgy action scenes, and distinctive characters all contribute to an opening volume well worth checking out.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : B+
Animation : B+
Art : A-
Music : B

+ Bold and interesting artistic style, good English dub.
− Plotting is initially unclear.

Karasu whisks Haruka away to La'cryma while Yu panics and her friends and teacher, who don't know what's going on, frantically look for her. In La'cryma Haruka gets to see what this (from her viewpoint) alternate future dimension looks like and why the Dragon Knights have been going on about its devastation by Shangri-La. She also discovers that, in this future world, some of the faces are strangely familiar. While the leaders of La'cryma wish to call upon the power of the Dragon Torque to protect their crippled world from Shangri-La, Karasu has other ideas. Unable to get over the death of "his" Haruka, he vows to protect this one at all costs and flees back to the past world with her, where her friends wait with lots of questions. The Dragon Knights aren't about to let Karasu go, however, and the mad Atori is still in that world seeking to destroy the Dragon Torque, not caring that his actions could have calamitous consequences.

In addition to the extradimensional intrigue, Yu still has his own serious problems with his mother's overbearing emphasis on his upcoming entrance exams. But might the truth coming out about why she pushes him so hard be the ticket to improving his situation?

Review:

The main strike against the first volume of Noein was that its plot was so obfuscated that it took great effort to make much sense of it. That problem is corrected in episodes 6 and 7, where not only is enough information revealed for a viewer to finally understand much of what's actually going on with this whole dimension/time-hopping business, but it's accomplished without feeling like you've been subjected to the kind of "info-dumping" normally required to explain something like this. With that out of the way, the story is free to become a thoroughly engrossing mix of hard-core sci-fi and very ordinary dramatic elements.

A common plot device in sci-fi stories across all forms of media and all nationalities is the individual from a dystopian future world traveling into a past world to seek a solution to/prevention of future problems. The slight twist Noein puts on this concept is that the person who is the "solution" is taken 15 years into the future to do her thing, rather than the future individuals trying to deal with matters in the past. And what an unpleasant place La'cryma is, with its shades of Twelve Monkeys, fights against alien invaders on a devastated surface, and bugs as a main source of nutrition. Given how bad the situation is, it's no wonder that Karasu's fellow Dragon Knights have a problem with him trying to protect the one girl who could possibly save them all.

Of course, it's also not hard to see why Karasu would want to protect her, given who he was in the past and how utterly likeable a character Haruka is. She may be on the spunky side but is not overly cute, energetic, smart, mature, or anything else that is normally done to excess in anime characterizations. She is a balanced and believable girl who is surrounded by equally balanced and believable friends. Yu's tendency towards stress-induced anxiety is partly remedied once his mother is finally forced to confront why she is pushing him so unreasonably hard, a sequence of events which takes up the better part of two episodes to play out but never for a moment feels boring or like the sci-fi story is being interrupted. In fact, it's consistently amazing how effectively the story can tuck all this very normal real-life stuff in amongst the extreme sci-fi elements and get it to work. It is not something a lesser series could pull off.

Although the action scenes are strictly a side event rather than the main focus, they are not given any lesser attention. The vivid imagery used and way the movements are handled makes them stand out in an environment normally replete with shortcuts like isolation shots and stills. The animation and artistry do an excellent job of giving them distinct looks and making them feel exciting. Even the power-up scenes feel fresh because they are kept short and don't have people standing around marveling at them, unlike in most

major shonen series.

The other visuals are great, too, although the overall artistic style is a marked departure from the norm for anime. The all-CG Shangri-La ships/creatures are exquisitely-detailed marvels on the level of a Gankutsuou, and the vision of the alternate future of La'cryma is suitably industrial and unpleasant. By contrast, the backgrounds of the present-time Hakodate are very realistic recreations of actual locations, as elaborated upon in the Extras. The character designs are a love-it-or-hate-it kind of thing, with Karasu being the weakest design and Yu and Haruka the strongest. The color palette used also distinguishes it from most other anime; while not at all muted, it's not the bright, cheery color set one normally sees in recent anime titles. CG is used very extensively, especially for vehicles and trolleys; its integration with the 2D animation is moderately good, but there are better examples.

The one minor weakness to the second volume is that its dramatic musical score gets thoroughly overwrought at times. Its balance is better on other occasions and it is most notable by its absence on still others. The opener and closer continue to be bland numbers.

The English voice acting, which was one of the highlights of the first volume, continues to be top-rate. Nearly every actor is well-chosen for the role and performs it admirably; even scenes where two characters are clearly drunk are handled well, with appropriate amounts of slurring and adjustments to tenor. The English script strays enough for the dialogue to sound good in English, and does make a few minor changes in places, but the adjustments are never enough to be a problem.

The main extra this time around is the 16-minute second part of the travelogue on Hakodate begun in the first volume, where the director and Haruka's seiyuu explore various locations used as the basis for the background art in the series. Viewing this leads one to appreciate more fully just how accurately the background artistry represents the actual locations. The only other extra this time is a set of "player cards," which is nothing more than shots of key characters. As before, a Spanish subtitling option is included along with the standard English sub. At a base price of only $19.95 for five episodes, it's also one of your more economical first-run anime values.

The title character of the series, the mysterious otherworldly Noein, makes no appearances at all in these five episodes, and the Dragon Torque only appears infrequently, but that doesn't matter. While not a pure sci-fi endeavor, it is nonetheless a distinctive and engrossing entry into the sci-fi genre with a high level of merit across the board. If the first volume didn't hook you, this one almost certainly will.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A
Overall (sub) : A
Story : A
Animation : A-
Art : A-
Music : B+

+ Excellent writing and English voice work, great balance of sci-fi and character drama.
− Music is sometimes overwrought, bland opener and closer.

In addition to securing the Dragon Torque, the Dragon Knights must now deal with renegade Karasu, who has resolved to do everything in his power to protect Haruka, even if that means battling an old friend to the death. Wild card Atori must also be dealt with, but another even more dire threat looms in the background: the mysterious masked being who calls itself Noein, and the menacing aliens of Shangri-La who seem to

be working with/for Noein. Through it all Haruka struggles to learn more about the power of the Dragon Torque she possesses and the ability it gives her to perceive and cross over to other dimensions, an ability which may have more frighteningly powerful potential than she ever imagined.

Meanwhile Kyoji Kooriyama and Kyoko Uchida delve into the explanations of quantum mechanics as they relate to alternate dimensions and decide to hunt down a particular scientist to discuss their concerns over a potentially very dangerous project dealing with that subject, a man who also happens to be Haruka's father. And Yu struggles to deal with his jealousy over his older self's apparently tight relationship with Haruka.

Review:

The above synopsis does not even come close to describing all that that happens in this volume, partly because of some genuinely surprising twists the story takes but mostly because there's just too much going on through these five episodes to describe everything without giving a lengthy dissertation. So much happens that each episode feels longer than it actually is (and at more than 25 minutes per episode, they are already a little longer than the norm for broadcast animation), yet the pacing never feels rushed. Even with all its plot development and sci-fi goings-on, the storytelling still somehow finds time to delve into character development and lots of explanatory exposition and throw in great action scenes, too. Most series could not accomplish all that this one does in half again the same length of time.

The most amazing things about the series – and this volume in particular – are the successful melding of dramatically different story elements and nonreliance on traditional anime elements. Its children actually behave like children should instead of the normal goofy animated take on their behavior (and note that I did not say "anime" for a reason), and from that comes the volume's few light-hearted moments. While allowing the kids to express themselves, it also delves into explanations of some of the fundamentals of the extremely complex theoretical world of quantum mechanics and how it relates to the dimension-hopping themes of the series; a point of particular relevance to the plot is the notion that mere observation of an event can have an effect on the event, which in this case is extended to mean that Haruka can make alternate realities actually happen just by using the Dragon Torque to see them – a scary notion. This isn't your normal sci-fi technobabble, as all of what Uchida explains in episode 11 and elsewhere is based on actual philosophy and science. By extension, this means that the entirety of the series and its dimension-hopping mechanics is, in fact, based on actual philosophy and science rather than just the fantastic musings of its creator. As a nice touch, the visuals accompanying Uchida's explanation in episode 11 include a sly reference to the famous Schrödinger's cat thought experiment, which will probably fly over the head of all but the best-educated viewers. Despite much of the cast being kids, this is definitely not kiddie fare.

As with previous volumes, this one further explores some of the underlying psychological elements. What does it say about a person who's jealous of an older alternate-dimension version of himself? The writing also continues to delve into the "what is reality and what is an illusion" mode of thinking, and while most people wish at some point that they could revisit the past and look for ways to have seen events play out differently, Haruka actually subconsciously has the power to do that. But is she old enough to understand and appreciate it?

Coming up more prominently in this volume than the previous ones is the creepy side of the story. We have all seen horror and/or supernatural stories about phones that are supposed to be disconnected and nonfunctional suddenly ringing, allowing the listener to communicate with people from different times and places than should be physically possible, but the gimmick gets used quite effectively here. Most series also

could not pull off having a CG-created alien which looks thoroughly ridiculous (think of a giant seahorse with a hand on a tentacle) and yet also still carries an aura of menace, but this one does. The reappearance of Noein, whose role in the scheme of things and connection to Shangri-La (and also what Shangri-La is) is finally made somewhat clear, adds the final bit of edginess.

The highlight of the visuals is unquestionably the boldly stylish action scenes, which use distorted graphics and a pulse-pounding musical backing to give a strong sense of the kind of frenetic movement one would expect to see in fights like this. The lowlights are a few thoroughly unappealing adult character designs and irregularities in visual quality. The series retains its unique look while continuing to heavily employ CG artistry in its aliens and perspective-shifting shots of buildings. Background art, as before, meticulously recreates the real-world settings used for the series, and the animation supports the series well, whether dealing with the action scenes, more fantastical visual effects, or the exaggerated reactions of some characters.

As with previous volumes, the musical score normally works quite effectively but can get a bit too heavy and overly melodramatic in key scenes. The opener and closer remain unchanged. The styles of delivery for the English cast may not always match up perfectly to those of the original Japanese cast, but one would have to get quite picky to find fault with the accuracy of the casting relevant to the characters; Melissa Fahn and Yuri Lowenthal are especially good choices for Haruka and Yuu, respectively. No fault can be found with the quality of the performances, either, beyond possibly Ai. (And she has few lines in this block of episodes anyway.) The English script also sticks relatively close to the original.

Included with these five episodes is part 3 of the location-scouting documentary seen in previous volumes, an image gallery of screen shots, and a "NOEIN: Storyboard to Screen" feature, which takes clips from all three volumes and breaks them down into one-after-another comparisons with their components parts; a nice inclusion for those interested in the animation process. As with previous volumes, this one also has an Easter Egg, which can be accessed by selecting the "Noein Volume 3" circle on the main menu. It provides a collection of humorous alternate dialogue outtakes, many of which are actually quite funny but most of which are definitely not PG-rated in content. Set-up options include Spanish as well as English subtitles. This volume also comes with a very economical list price (MSRP of only $19.99), making it a great bargain.

Manga Entertainment, a company which never shies from licensing and distributing thought-provoking sci-fi series, has done an excellent job with this one, too, with one exception: the three freakin' month wait in between volumes. Hopefully this is not a sign of the future. Otherwise this volume has a lot to recommend it: intense, stylish action, involving storytelling, complex explanations, and surprising plot twists. If the first two volumes didn't convince you that this is one of the best of recent sci-fi anime series, this volume should.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : A
Animation : A-
Art : B+
Music : B+

+ Dense writing capably brings together diverse elements, spectacular action scenes.
− Three months in between releases, some artistic quality control issues.

The Magic Circle Project, intended to give humankind a greater mastery over quantum mechanics, proceeds apace despite the protestations of numerous individuals over the danger it represents. The home

dimension of Haruka may also be in the first stages of its convergence as Shangri-La makes more incursions, while La'cryma's status grows increasingly unstable. Haruka views slightly altered versions of her own past and life at the instigation of Noein but ultimately returns home, only to once again become the target of Kosagi and, later, Kuina – but it seems that Kuina has other motivations than trying to save La'cryma. When events land Haruka, Yu, and Karasu once again in both La'cryma and Shangri-La, Yu's life proves to be at stake.

Meanwhile Uchida and Kooriyama try to piece together what exactly is happening and where their priorities lie.

Review:

The content of Noein is such technical, mind-trippy stuff that, once again, the Synopsis above only begins to do justice to what all goes on through these five episodes. The quantum mechanical foundation of the whole dimension-hopping and dimensional convergence structure was firmly-established last volume, so the plot of this one runs with it further by delving even more into stable vs. unstable quantum states, defining everything in quantum terms, determining reality by perspective and observation rather than empirical measurements, alternate realities, branching futures, and complex technobabble slipped in once the writers feel that the audience is too flummoxed by the details to notice. It is heady, high-concept stuff on a degree not normally found in anime outside of titles with "Ghost in the Shell" in their name. It is also to the immense credit of producer Satelight that everything actually makes sense if you carefully pay attention and think about it a bit afterwards. Too often series which attempt this kind of approach get so bogged down in their technicalities that they hopelessly muddle their stories, but not here.

As with earlier volumes, this one strives to achieve balanced storytelling by mixing the freaky sci fi elements with the very normal travails of impending middle school students trying to enjoy their summer break. The drama involving Yu's overstressed behavior and his mother's ironclad insistence on him concentrating on his studies officially passes with this volume, resulting in a more relaxed Yu than we have previously seen but also leaving a gap in the storytelling that is only partly filled by Haruka's concerns about forgetting people from the past. More of the character drama instead falls to the adults, who have to deal with concerns about the Magic Circle Project, personal motivations, and Atori's returning memory.

Although the series would not be what it is without its character drama, the sci fi elements are still what truly power the series. Haruka's ability, as the Dragon Torque, to finalize unstable existences based on her observation gains a frightening new dimension when it becomes apparent that she can, in some circumstances, even use the ability to cheat death. Also in this volume the true natures of La'cryma and Shangri-La get revealed, more spectacular fights take place, lots of dimension-hopping goes on, and science applies to interpretation of existence in existential ways. In other words, just what you've come to expect from the series if you have been watching up to this point.

The irregularities in visual quality mentioned in the review of the previous volume have thankfully not continued, allowing the artistic quality to return to the level seen in the first two volumes. Some of the adult character designs are still unappealing, and the way character talk and smile may strike some as very odd, but the intricate and imaginative beauty of the CG designs for the Shangri-La entities and vessels more than compensates for disappointments elsewhere. The CG work combines with the sense of motion in the action scenes, the unusual style of the character designs, and other impressive feats of coloring and CG effects to create a unique look which not only stands wholly apart from normal anime visual styles but ranks as one of the most visually striking and original looks this side of Gankutsuou. It may not work for everyone

but certainly can be impressive.

The soundtrack plays milder through this stretch of episodes, occasionally using the dramatic operatic themes heard earlier in the series but not overdoing it so much, and is better for it. The English dub also stays solid through this stretch, with strong performances in key roles and an English script that does not engage in needless alteration to the original. The English version of Noein (who gets more lines here than in any previous volume) does not quite achieve the chilling menace seeped into the Japanese performance, but that and a few lines involving the operation of La'cryma's dimensional transfer system not being included at all in the dub are the only minor flaws.

Volume four offers a much skimpier selection of extras, this time including on an art gallery containing a limited number of screenshots and a textless opener. The Easter Egg seen found on previous volumes seems not to have been continued with this one. The Set-Up does still include Spanish as well as English subtitling options, however, and it still carried an economical base price for five episode of animation.

Overall this volume may not be quite as strong as the previous one, but it still provides five more episodes of quality entertainment. The three-month wait for this volume to come out will not leave you disappointed.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : B+
Animation : A-
Art : A-
Music : B+

+ Involved writing combines diverse elements well.
− Fewer Extras than past volumes.

While the Dragon Knights and elementary school gang try to locate the missing Haruka and Yu, Uchida, Kooryiama, and Professor Mayuzumi come to an agreement that the Magic Circle Project must be stopped, lest it trigger a dimensional collapse. Such a collapse is precisely what Noein wants, however, and it is he that Yu and Karasu must contend with in Shangri-La. He shows Haruka the most unpleasant futures for her friends in an effort to manipulate her into working his will, but none are more unpleasant than his own. With a disaster that could cause the quantum collapse of the universe at hand, it falls to an intrepid few and one Dragon Torque-endowed 12-year-old girl to stop Noein's nihilistic plan.

Review:

At turns intense, ominous, spectacular, confusing, and even emotional, the final four episodes of this convoluted exploration of quantum physics and existential philosophizing never get dull. Though the writing resorts to sci-fi standbys like doomsday plans, branching alternate realities, potential futures, and madmen twisted by tragedies in their youth, its creative application of quantum mechanics, effective characterizations, and talent for staging incredible action sequences (mostly) prevents the series from losing steam going into its conclusion. The grand climax in the final episode does not carry quite the dramatic punch one would hope for given the build-up, but few will walk away from this one feeling disappointed.

Whether or not fans will walk away understanding everything is another story, as even intense concentration may not succeed in piecing together all the details; this is not a block of episodes you want to watch casually. Fortunately the series can fall back on the stabilizing influence of its steady character development, and this time Atori gets the feature treatment. By the end of volume four he had already showed signs of regressing from the dramatic personality change which afflicted him in volume three, but the way he interacts with, and is affected by, Miho (and why) shows both a newer, more integrated personality potential and thoroughly enjoyable character by-play. The set-ups for the tragedies afflicting the future versions of the elementary school gang resonate remarkably well for as time-worn a gimmick as they represent, and their resolutions provide an emotional punch which may catch viewers off guard.

And yes, the series finally resolves the longest-standing mystery in Noein: the true identity of the old guy with the straw hat, who keeps appearing to Haruka but never introduces himself, gets revealed. The definitive identity of Noein also gets revealed, although claims to that effect were made at the end of the previous volume.

Little can be said about the artistry and technical merits that has not already been mentioned in previous reviews; by this point the series' unique look either works for you or it doesn't. The CG renditions of the living Shangri-La airships still amaze with their exquisite detail and near-flawless integration with the regular animation, and the 17-year-old designs for the elementary kids (the only truly new artistic element) stay convincingly consistent with their younger designs. Action scenes never disappoint with their detailed motion and fluid movements, and the CG animation is flawless, but the emphasis on exaggerated movements can make the regular animation look jerky, especially in this volume.

Little more can also be said about the dramatic but effective soundtrack, which uses a few minor new themes but mostly still relies on its core orchestration and vocals. Music director Hikaru Nanase, whose other credits include notables like Chrono Crusade, Galaxy Angel, and Scrapped Princess, never overcomes a tendency to lay it on a bit thick, especially in action scenes, but some novel sound effects by the Shangri-La airships balance out that minor flaw. The English dub performances also maintain the standard of the last couple of volumes: the performances of Haruka, Atori, and Uchida are gems, the rest of the cast stays solid, the pronunciation of Haruka's name varies from VA to VA, and preferences will generally fall along normal sub/dub lines. The English script varies a bit more than it should at times but never becomes a major problem.

The only normal Extras are a textless opener and a brief gallery of screenshots, but as with some previous volumes, an Easter Egg can be found by pushing "up" on the remote control while the cursor is on Play on the main menu page. Select the "Noein Volume 5" circle and you get several minutes of audio cuts featuring bloopers and often-crude alternate dialogue, some of which pokes fun at the pronunciation issue. Spanish subtitles also remain as an option.

The quality of the writing may slide a bit, but the final volume still delivers. To its end one of the most economical dubbed series of the year remains a great and entertaining view.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : B+
Animation : B+
Art : A-
Music : A-

+ Characterizations, action scenes, CG visuals.

– Can be hard to follow at times, relies too much on sci-fi stand-bys.

Top anime of the decade (2011-07-03 20:40)

[1]Looking
back on 00′s: Part 1. Flow of 00′s, [2]Part
2: Marketing by Muhootsaver

Series of posts on anime trends in the first decade of the 21st century.

[3]2000-2009
Part 1: Looking Back by sdshamshel

Reflection on the trends of the decade.

[4]Anime
decade: From 'Japan Cool' to 'cooling off'
by Matt Alt

"I was surprised and shocked to witness the rise of anime in the 1990s, and now I feel those same emotions again as I watch it collapse in slow motion. Truly, the early 2000s timeline reads like the plot of an epic novel with an appropriately apocalyptic anime ending."

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[5]2000-2009
– Decade Summary Part 1 by Psgels

Very detailed post listing top three shows for each year and season with brief impressions.

[6]Leaders
of the Pack: 2000-2009 by Omo

Well-described unordered list of favorites with some retrospective.

[7]Top
50 Anime Series of the Decade by Gaguri

Excellent ordered list with over 4000 words, characterizing each anime. This list inspired several other people to create their own

[8]50 animes of the
decade by Sasa

Ordered list that includes many all-time favorites as well.

[9]Top
50 Anime of the decade by Cokematic

Ordered list that also includes anime movies and OVAs.

[10]Super Exhaustive
2000-2009 Anime List with Notes so You will Learn by Tj _han

List with brief impressions by genre.

[11]Anime
Favorites: 2000-2009 by Animekritik

Heading to a deserted island? Take these five shows with you

My Top 20 [12]OVAs,
[13]Movies
, [14]Series
of the Decade 2000-2009 by Chii

Ordered lists that feature some not very widely-known anime.

[15]Best
of the Noughties – 25 Favourite Anime by J1m0ne

"...a good show should always be a good show no matter
the subject matter and the intended audience."

[16]Top
10 Anime Films of the Decade [2000-2009] by Cello

Ordered list with links to full reviews.

[17]200
(+) Anime Worth Taking With Us Into the Next Decade by
21stcenturydigitalboy

"a list of every single worthwhile anime of the past
decade."

[18]Last
post of 2009: Anime decade lists, To my readers and Happy Holidays!

by Canne

Top five anime series, movies, and OPs

[19]Recapping
the decade 2000-2009 by Miz

Selection of anime by year with commentary.

[20]Fifty
Noughties animu speculation (first half), ([21]second
half) by Martin

Ordered list with commentary.

[22]Zzeroparticle's
List of 20 Noteworthy Anime Titles

"My list of twenty titles that made an impact upon me in
this past decade. "

[23]My
Top Eleven Anime Of The Decade by Omisyth

Ordered list with impressions for each show.

[24]And
before the decade concludes, here's my top eleven anime of the
2000s by Fangzhao

Ordered list with commentary, including an anime that is described
simply as "perfection".

[25]AC's
Top 20 Anime of the Decade

"...a decade of wonderful anime titles, most of them
contributing to my all-time best list"

[26]Sorrow-kun's
List of 50 Great Anime of the Decade 2000-2009

Ordered list of 50 anime with commentary.

[27]Best
Anime of the Decade: 2000-2009 by Kitsune

Ordered list with AMVs, OP/EDs, excerpts from anime, and links to
reviews.

[28]20
Awesomest Anime of the Decade (2000-2009) by Brikhaus

"My list probably won't sit well with the pretentious arthouse goons or the moe-loving fapboys, but rest assured these anime are actually good shows."

[29]20
Decade Highlights by Kavik Ryx

"for all the anime I've missed this decade, I feel blessed that I had the opportunity have seen these ones."

[30]Japanator's
Top 50 Anime of the Decade

Ordered list with an interesting choice for the top spot...

[31]My
Noughties in Anime by Absolute0

"I am by no means proclaiming that these series are the best of the decade. Some of them might be on your list, some of them might not. Whatever the case, I definitely enjoyed these."

[32]A
Reflection on a Decade by Shadowmage

Ordered lists of top 20 series and top 20 films/OVAs.

1. http://muhootsaver.tistory.com/entry/SP-Looking-back-00s-part-1-Flow-of-00s
2. http://muhootsaver.tistory.com/entry/Looking-back-on-00s-part-2-Marketing
3. http://ogiuemaniax.wordpress.com/2009/12/20/2000-2009-part-1-looking-back/
4. http://www.cnngo.com/tokyo/play/decade-anime-682165
5. http://psgels.blogsome.com/2009/12/01/2000-2009-decade-summary-part-1/
6. http://www.omonomono.com/2009/12/03/leaders-of-the-pack-2000-2009/
7. http://guriguriblog.wordpress.com/2009/12/04/top-50-anime-series-of-the-decade/
8. http://chrome.dasaku.net/?p=614
9. http://coke.dasaku.net/2009_12_06/top-50-anime-of-the-decade/
10. http://www.riuva.com/?p=1553
11. http://animekritik.wordpress.com/2009/12/11/anime-favorites-2000-2009/
12. http://oishiianime.com/2009/12/my-top-20-ovas-of-the-decade-2000-2009/
13. http://oishiianime.com/2009/12/my-top-20-movies-of-the-decade-2000-2009/
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15. http://atemonai.com/blog/best-of-the-noughties-25-favourite-anime/
16. http://japancinema.net/2009/12/16/top-10-anime-films-of-the-decade-2000-2009/
17. http://fuzakenna.com/2009/12/25/200-anime-worth-taking-with-us-into-the-next-decade/
18. http://canime.wordpress.com/2009/12/26/last-post-2009/
19. http://kielmaru07.wordpress.com/2009/12/27/recapping-the-decade-2000-2009/#more-1800

20. http://mononoaware.concretebadger.net/2009/12/29/fifty-noughties-animu-speculation-first-half/
21. http://mononoaware.concretebadger.net/2009/12/30/fifty-noughties-animu-speculation-second-half/
22. http://behind-the.nihonreview.com/20091231/zzeroparticles-list-of-20-noteworthy-anime-titles/
23. http://omisyth.wordpress.com/2009/12/31/my-top-eleven-anime-of-the-decade/
24. http://mikoto.wordpress.com/2009/12/31/and-before-the-decade-concludes-heres-my-top-eleven-anime-of-the-2000s/
25. http://behind-the.nihonreview.com/20100101/acs-top-20-anime-of-the-decade/
26. http://behind-the.nihonreview.com/20100102/sorrow-kuns-list-of-50-great-anime-of-the-decade-2000-2009/
27. http://celestialkitsune.wordpress.com/2010/01/02/best-anime-of-the-decade-2000-2009/
28. http://awesomelyshitty.wordpress.com/2010/01/03/20-awesomest-anime-of-the-decade-2000-2009/
29. http://behind-the.nihonreview.com/20100104/20-decade-highlights-kavik-ryx/
30. http://www.japanator.com/japanator-s-top-50-anime-of-the-decade-50-to-41-12862.phtml
31. http://scrumptious.animeblogger.net/2010/01/08/my-noughties-in-anime/
32. http://behind-the.nihonreview.com/20100105/a-reflection-on-a-decade/

Wolf's Rain review (2011-07-10 05:38)

In a desolate future world, wolves have not been seen for 200 years and are supposedly extinct. However, they've simply taken on illusionary forms that make them appear human. When a white wolf named Kiba shows up in a run-down city, his proud attitude attracts the attention of other wolves—naïve, undersized Toboe; street-smart, carefree Hige; and gruff loner Tsume. Together they set out in search of a legendary Paradise, led only by Kiba's instincts and the scent of a mysterious "Lunar Flower." But does Paradise even exist? Many humans will stand in their way: soldiers, scientists, Nobles, and a hunter who has sworn vengeance against all wolves. If they are to ever find Paradise, they will have to risk their lives to get there.

Review:

Let's say you're a Wolf's Rain fan who never got around to collecting all the DVDs. Or maybe you caught some of it on Cartoon Network and want to know the rest. Or maybe you just never saw the show, and wonder why everyone thinks it's so great. Well, now's the chance—Bandai has packaged all seven DVDs in one stylish box, and thrown in the soundtrack CD for good measure. It's a fitting treatment for a series that takes the traditional hero's journey and builds a new legend out of it. Set in a vivid modern-fantasy world, with remarkable characters and powerful emotions, Wolf's Rain is a series that deserves the praise it gets.

The story of journeying towards a promised land has been around for thousands of years, but it's amazing what a little creative thinking can do. At first glance, the world of Wolf's Rain is just a patchwork of familiar elements in science fiction and fantasy: domed post-apocalyptic cities, ancient castles and keeps, snowcapped wastelands, even deserts inspired by the Wild West. It's the sheer variety of these settings, however, that keeps things interesting. Also, the entire world is kept together by a consistent back-story: once you know what happened 200 years ago, it's easy to understand why things the way they are.

Like a typical adventure, this story involves the interwoven quests of various characters—the wolves, the wolf hunter, the scientists, the Nobles—who all meet at the end. Combined, it forms one very epic, 30-episode chase. Although carefully planned, there are still some narrative hiccups: Episodes 15-18 are nothing but recaps, effectively killing the momentum, and there's also the occasional plot hole where people (or wolves) instantly arrive somewhere without prior explanation.

But none of this would be complete without the characters. Even though the four wolves can all be described in one word—the leader, the loner, the goofball, the kid—their personalities and back-stories are developed enough to set up some very touching moments at the end. Individually, they seem like stereotypes, but as they travel together, they change each other and end up a very different pack. It's this long-term character development that makes the final four episodes so emotionally powerful, even reaching out to affect the human characters too.

The visuals in this series showcase Studio BONES at their most imaginative, with beautiful backgrounds that depict settings from high-tech mysticism to urban decay to open wilderness. The character designs are equally striking: in their human form, the wolves wear contemporary outfits, making them the most accessible of all characters. This also helps scenes that demand a human range of expression; it would be a less engaging series if they were just a bunch of oversized dogs running around (plus, drawing animals all the time would be a nightmare for the animators). The production quality is also top-notch, with sharp lines and colors, and animation that's convincingly smooth—just look at some of the fight scenes.

Yoko Kanno's music score adds greatly to the show's emotional impact; her melodies always carry a melancholy gracefulness whether they be orchestral pieces or pop songwriting. On the classical end, Kanno relies on lush strings to express the perils and pleasures of the journey, while insert songs in certain episodes convey emotion in a more direct way. However, it's the Maaya Sakamoto ending song, "gravity," that really shows how much feeling Kanno can pack into a piece. Touches of folk and world music round out the score, and on the soundtrack CD you'll hear all of these varied styles.

The English dub for this series is one of the best ever done; each voice actor brings their character to life with a distinct personality. There is no single standout performance, but rather, everyone is consistently good—even those tricky emotional scenes are as heartfelt as the original. Interviews with the Japanese voice actors come as extras on the first two discs, but the English cast deserves just as much attention for their stellar work. The dub script, too, strikes that perfect balance between accuracy and smoothness, sticking closely with the original translation and re-wording only for clarity and impact.

Bandai's black, angular box is a striking design that sets it apart from typical boxsets; the embossed Wolf's Rain logo is a classy touch along with the usual character artwork on the exterior. Although it doesn't open in the conventional way (slide the top half upwards), the design comfortably houses all the DVDs plus the CD and has a shape that will sit just fine on DVD shelves.

Wolf's Rain is proof that old story ideas can still yield new experiences, as long as creators are willing to put their hearts and minds into it. This heroic journey would be, well, just another road trip were it not for deeply sympathetic characters and an epic setting that sparks the imagination. With eye-catching visuals bringing that world to life, and a music score that adds emotional depth to the tale, it's no wonder that everyone thinks Wolf's Rain is so great. This is one box that any fan will be proud to have on their shelf.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : B
Animation : A
Art : A-
Music : A

+ An epic, emotionally moving journey with artwork and music to match.
− Disrupted only by that 4-episode block of recaps halfway through.

Fullmetal Alchemist Brotherhood (2011-07-12 12:18)

In a decision between Monty Python's Flying circus 16-ton and Fullmetal Alchemist Brotherhood, i went with Fullmetal Alchemist Brotherhood. Monty Python's Flying Circus from 1974 is a tad dated.

In 2003, Studio BONES produced an anime adaptation of Fullmetal Alchemist, a shonen series from relatively new mangaka Hiromu Arakawa. The end result was a smash hit for both Japanese and American audiences, ranking #20 in TV Asahi's list of the Top 100 most popular anime, and continuing to run on Adult Swim for years after its incredibly successful initial run with longtime anime fans and non-fans alike, becoming a gateway title to otakudom somewhat comparable to Cowboy Bebop and Spirited Away. For all its acclaim, however, a fair amount of fans were displeased with the adaptation's severe divergence from the original manga.

Brotherhood seeks to rectify this complaint with a retelling of Ed and Al's quest to regain their lost bodies, this time in strict accordance with the events of the manga, which is now nearing completion. The revisited epic jumps to an electrifying start, following the brothers from their tragic origins up through their first encounter with the self-proclaimed homunculus, Greed…

Review:

It would be nice to have written a real plot summary to preface this review, it would be nice to pretend everyone doesn't know the synopsis already, and as such, it would be nice to discard the first anime adaptation of FMA and take Brotherhood completely at face value. It's the only way to gauge an adaptation's worth as a work unto itself, after all. Unfortunately, this series makes it clear from episode one that it doesn't want to be taken in through fresh eyes, but rather, squeals of nostalgia. Like its predecessor, Brotherhood's begins its pilot in media res, but instead of doing this as a way to establish the cast and the world they live in, this is really an excuse to cram as many well-known characters and their catchphrases into one episode as possible. This does not feel like the first episode to a fantastic journey, it plays like an episode of Saturday Night Live where retired cast members come back for a cameo and only those who recognize them laugh at the skit. Of course there is a great deal of action, the story is well underway, and some character establishment is present, but "establishing" that "ha ha, Ed is short" at least four times in ten minutes makes this easy to forget.

Speaking of casting, fans of the Japanese version of FMA may be at odds with the casting choices here. Romi Paku, Rie Kugimiya, and Keiji Fujiwara return as Ed, Al, and Hughes respectively, but the majority of the characters have been recast, and many, notably Mustang's new seiyuu, sound wholly different from their original voices. Still, no complaint can be found with the acting as of yet, and this goes for the dub as well. With the notable exceptions of Dameon Clarke and Aaron Dismuke, the entire English cast, down to some incidentals like comedic vagrant Yoki, returns here and mostly sound as if they've never left, which is a very good thing if the glowing reception for the previous dub is any indication. J. Michael Tatum takes over Clarke's place as Scar, playing the role quite differently but for good reason: Scar is a very different character in this version of the story. Maxey Whitehead takes over the post-pubescent Dismuke's role as Al, and while still clearly not Dismuke, does a remarkable job emulating his voice. What's more important, of course, is that she fill the part dramatically, regardless of her vocal quality, and in that regard, they could not have found a better replacement for Aaron's great performance in the first series. The english cast is also

responsible for the only noteworthy extras on this release: a pair of commentaries, wherein we are introduced to the talented Maxey Whitehead and everyone discusses Tesla and anachronistic rotary telephones. Thanks to the breakneck pace of the show, nearly all the main cast makes an appearance somewhere in these first thirteen episodes, so viewers can judge for themselves what to think overall.

This is a party held for the fans, and the more diehards you can pack into a room to watch this series, the more enjoyable it will be. This is highly recommended, because viewed alone with the fanboy (or girl) switch off, the very first episode is borderline terrible. By episode three, there is no borderline. Now portraying these events for a third time and striving to do it uniquely, Brotherhood plows through key emotional moments just before shattering them with poorly placed humor, all the while dogged by music so uninspired and distracting, it sounds suspiciously like a mix from Pro Scores tacked on far too late in the game. In fact, the musical score of Brotherhood has got to be its highest detriment. This series' fear of silence is astounding, and overly grandiose choral music or piping loops of orchestral mediocrity blare through scenes that were more effective without them…just compare to the other, quieter anime. It is honestly embarrassing. By episode 4 the series has shown signs of restraint, but it's not yet doing anything that the first anime and the manga did not do better, because it can't seem to decide between the two mediums in its execution.

With the exception of its celebratory premiere episode, this series is everything that the fans have hoped for: a transcription of the original manga, nearly by the panel, with elements and events added in occasionally to pad for time or speed it up and substitute chapters like the train hijacking or the Youswell coalmines already covered faithfully in the first anime. It seems loyal to its source manga to a fault, playing out like a pan of various comic panels and lapsing into super-deformity and screaming for nearly a third of every episode, but the places it chooses to step out and improvise are much worse. Case in point: by the time Father Cornello turns into the Hulk, exhaustion and confusion have replaced all initial fanthusiasm, never mind any poor newcomer who happened to stumble upon the raucous mess. Once the dust has cleared, this series has covered roughly 33 episodes of the first anime's material in its first 13, or to be more accurate, 7 volumes of manga.

Still, to be fair…how many anime fans have not seen Fullmetal Alchemist or have at least had its entire plot spoiled for them by their friends who have? The franchise was lucrative enough to allow a viewership entirely of prior fans, and should they hold out past the garish introduction, the later episodes in this release are already improving. Al's identity crisis and the brothers' reunion with Izumi are handled well, and despite rough spots in execution, the story at Fullmetal's heart is incredibly strong, and not even slipshod pacing and delivery can tarnish that by much. All complaints against this series are simply comparing it against an incredibly high pedigree, but it is still above average.

In truth, there are precisely three places this adaptation surpasses its predecessor. Adherence to the manga, obviously, which will be a more rewarding trait when new material is animated, and a budget sizable enough to make those coming episodes an incredible treat for all. Brotherhood carries a rounder and warmer look than its predecessor, with simpler character models that are both more fluid in animation and, of course, eerily exact to Arakawa's illustrations, down to Ed's puppyish downturned mouth when he's being obstinate. It could even be argued that this sketchier, more velveteen look will lend the gorier events of the manga more tolerance than the original series, which is sometimes accused of being melodramatic. Whatever the case, a couple fights in these initial offerings are near feature-quality, and that's reason enough for praise. Thirdly, a minor but appreciated detail, the opening and closing themes to the show are wonderful. FMA has had a number of catchy pop and rock themes grace its episodes, but YUI's Again and SID's USO are so good at conveying the heart of the story they play more like love letters to the series itself, assisted by some downright moving animation that proves this remake may be in good hands after all.

If those factors make it a superior series for certain fans, namely aficionados of the manga, then rejoice, because it will run for many more episodes to come. For those wishing to view it as standalone entertainment, however, it is floundering in its own self-indulgence, pleading for approval, and despite being fairly enjoyable for it, only has room to improve. With any luck, it probably will, and quickly. Until then, either the first anime or the manga should absolutely be experienced first, then this younger sibling can be given a fair shake.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B
Overall (sub) : B
Story : B-
Animation : A-
Art : B+
Music : C+

\+ Much higher production values for the well-loved story; an entirely new animal from the original while still maintaining the essence of the franchise, later episodes show promise
− Catered almost exclusively to prior fans, using its assured audience base to get away with a rushed, noisy, and tactless presentation that is "faithful" to a fault, earlier episodes are terrible

Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood Blu-ray Part 2
BLURAY
Synopsis:
Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood Blu-ray Part 2 BLURAY
Fuhrer King Bradley gets personally involved in dealing with Greed and his chimera soldiers, leading to a quick and messy solution which also results in Al regaining his memories from the time of the alchemical accident. In the wake of that incident, visitors from the distant eastern land of Xing arrive on the scene, one a prince (Lin) with his accompanying duo of warriors and the other a girl (May) with her accompanying mini-panda. Both have an interest in learning the secret of immortality to further their respective clans' statuses in an upcoming bid to succeed the dying Xing Emperor and both bring with them the Eastern traditions of alcehestry (a variation of alchemy focused on medical arts), so both hook up with prominent Amestrian players – the former with Ed and Al, the latter with Scar. All get caught up in the ongoing schemes of the homunculi and their Father, although both Ed and Colonel Mustang bring their own schemes into play focused on drawing out the homunculi, learning the truth about a former comrade's death, and learning just how far up the chain of command the influence of the homunculi goes. Amidst the battles, subterfuge, and occasional foolishness, a loyal soldier gets made a scapegoat, Winry gets to confront the man who killed her parents, someone loses an arm, others lose their lives, and Ed gets to confront Hohenheim, his father. A few people get eaten, too (and not always intentionally) and someone other than Gluttony eats a shoe.

Review:

In wrapping up the affair with Greed and his chimera soldiers, episode 14 also marks the end of Brotherhood's quick replay through events covered in some form in the first TV series. With its closing scenes it heads off in a completely new direction, a move only further reaffirmed in episode 15 with the introduction of prominent characters who never appeared in the original series: the Xingese prince Lin (with servants Lan Fan and Fu) and princess May (with panda Shou Mei – actually they appeared briefly in an earlier episode, but this is their formal introduction). This expansion of the core cast provides ample additional

opportunities for gags and slick action scenes and adds another cute girl into the mix (Lan Fan is quite the looker when not shrouded in ninja gear), but just as importantly, it also expands a setting that was originally relatively limited for as worldly as its story was. A different culture taking an entirely different mindset to alchemy is a quite sensible and intriguing development, one not explored at all by the original series, but as of the end of episode 26 it has been treated more as a curiosity than an element of major importance to the ongoing plot. More significant is the presence of Father, the mastermind behind the homunculi in this version of the story; he appeared very briefly in earlier episodes but has broader involvement here. The addition of the backstory involving the legendary city of Xerxes also adds a new wrinkle to the overall story, essentially replacing the role served by the underground city in Conqueror of Shamballa.

Not all of the new direction involves new characters and story elements. Barry the Chopper, who was arguably the most colorful of the antagonists in the original series, gets a substantially expanded role as he works with the good guys, while the character who was the homunculus Pride in the first series becomes Wrath in this one, the barely-seen Sloth is entirely different, and the heard-but-not-seen Pride also seems to have an entirely different identity. Some of the prominent subordinate soldiers get caught up in much messier complications and Scar's backstory is expanded, including connecting him to an event portrayed in the first series that previously did not explicitly involve him. Unfortunately, though, those expansions fail to make Scar a more interesting character. The same cannot be said of King Bradley, who gets some sharp new action sequences and background development which fleshes him out better. Winry gets some new scenes, too, although only one of them has more than a negligible impact. (That one scene is arguably the strongest dramatic moment in the series to date, however.)

Freed of the constraints of having to paraphrase big chunks of the original series, this new material progresses smoothly and at a brisk pace, creating a very fluid and dynamic story in which multiple things are always going on at the same time. Though these episodes still retain the full frequency of (supposedly) humorous asides, they have little downtime; nearly everything that happens feels like it fits into the bigger picture, and the episode content rarely wastes time on needless distractions. Yes, there are flashback scenes, but unlike the producers of Naruto and Bleach, the producers of this one actually understand how to use such scenes without bogging down the story with them. The producers never forget through this run that this is, at heart, an action-based shonen action series, either, as it provides plenty enough spectacular action sequences, with plenty enough variety, to satisfy any action junkie. Those who like their graphic content will not be disappointed, either, as plenty of bloodletting can be found here and some scenes (especially the death scene of one of the homunculi) border on gruesome. Plot developments over the course of this block make it clear that, for all that has happened so far, these are just the first stages of a much longer story, and based on what is going on at the end of this set, it should continue to be an interesting one for quite some time.

Most would say that the visuals are an upgrade from the first series, and indeed these episodes have many especially sharp moments; Envy's true form is quite the impressive monster, battle scenes are typically visual spectacles, and flashback scenes use some neat coloring effects which focus on the eye colors of involved characters. New additions to the cast vary between respectable designs and semi-caricature. On the downside, flaws in the integration between character animation and background art are commonly noticeable (at least on Blu-Ray, anyway) and silly moments sometimes go too far into superderformed caricature. The animation shines in the fight scenes but it is more ordinary elsewhere.

Although the first TV series was no slouch in the music department, Brotherhood's musical score may be even better. Directed by Akira Senju, the same man who turned in such a wonderful effort on Red Garden, it delivers a rich, deep, and effective sound clearly made with advanced digital stereo equipment in mind. It is heavy, thrilling, creepy, or silly as needed, and unlike many other anime scores it knows how to be dramatic and full-bodied while stopping just shy of going overboard. Its original opener and closer remain through episode 14 before being replaced by "Hologram" and "Let It Out" respectively in episode 15; the

former is a decent number which is a straight-up replacement for the first opener, while the latter is a more adult contemporary-styled number whose tone and lyrics serve as such a perfect round-out for many of the episodes that it stands among the year's best closers.

Funimation's English dub for the original series was a strong one, and the vast majority of the original cast reprises their roles here. Maxey Whitehead is a good-as-could-be-hoped-for replacement for the aged-out Aaron Dismuke; she has slipped into the voice and role well by this point, shaking off the tentativeness heard in the earliest episodes. Contrarily, J. Michael Tatum is an adequate but far less impressive replacement for Dameon Clarke as Scar. Perhaps the best performance in this run belongs to Jerry Jewel for his nigh-unrecognizable, gleefully twisted take on Barry the Chopper, but many other performers shine, too, including the vocally-flexible Chris Cason as Gluttony and especially Ed Blaylock as King Bradley, a role in which he skillfully embodies a sense of his real identity's name without ever making him sound crazed or evil. Personal preference may still reign in the key roles, but the English performances and minor script adjustments lose nothing in comparison to the original Japanese dub.

Funimation's Blu-Ray transfer, which is presented in 1080p using the AVC codec, looks decent but unimpressive as such transfers go, especially considering how recent the animation is. It excels most in its sharp coloring but suffers from some of the same minor visual flaws that the first set had, although only those with top-grade equipment and picky eyes are likely to notice. The presentation makes very good use of lossless audio tracks, especially in the English dubbed version; you'll want a good stereo system to fully appreciate this one. On the downside, a viewer can only switch between audio tracks via the main menu and the Japanese dub seems to be hard-subbed – both major annoyances for those who wish to flip back and forth between dubs or watch the English dub with subtitles on. (Thankfully, this has not been a common practice with Funi Blu-Ray releases beyond this series.) On-disk Extras include clean opener and closer for the new set and a pair of audio commentaries for the English dub, both featuring line producer Mike "Havoc" McFarland; episode 14's also features Vic Mignogna and Chris "Greed" Patton, while episode 23's features Monica "May" Rial, Trish "Lan Fan" Nishamura, and Todd "Ling" Haberkorn. The latter is, naturally, a little sillier (Monica is involved, after all), but both mostly stay on-topic.

The big question that still remains is whether or not this new version of Fullmetal Alchemist, given that it has now shown some new content, is clearly better than the original. The answer should be irrelevant; why don't fans just enjoy the fact that they get to see a whole bunch more fresh FMA content and leave it at that? Does it really need to matter that this version sticks with the original manga, while the original veered off on its own? Unfortunately that does matter to a significant chunk of fandom, so let's look at the two. Brotherhood is unquestionably an even flashier and more graphic show than the original and tells a grander and broader story with upgraded sound and animation. Its emphasis is more firmly on the action and graphic content, however, at the expense of the philosophizing done in the original. The recurring underlying theme about how power should walk hand-in-hand with responsibility – and how abuse and calamity happen when it doesn't – that was so prominent in the original series is far less in evidence here (at least so far). While this loss of substance has gotten mostly washed over by the hyped-up action, it is still evident and may hurt the series' depth, comparatively speaking, in the long run. Taking the silly asides to greater extremes is not necessarily a Good Thing, either, unless the viewer is already a fan of that style of humor in the manga. Overall, this second series has proven quite good and entertaining so far, but claiming that it blows the first series out of the water is an exercise in hyperbole.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : B+
Overall (sub) : B+
Story : B+
Animation : B+

Art : B+
Music : A

+ Superb musical score, good English dub, great action sequences, new content.
− Apparently hard-subbed, some art integration issues, sacrifices some depth.

Ed and Ling (and Envy, too) reemerge from Gluttony's gut to be reunited with Al, only to discover that Al was in the process of meeting with the figure the Homunculi refer to as "Father" – who happens to look exactly like Hohenheim! All Hell breaks loose when Scar and May Chang also show up. In the wake of that mess, Ed and Al get their formal introduction to Wrath and are warned not to stick their noses too far into Homunculi business lest those they care about (i.e. Winry) be endangered. After a talk with Hawkeye, who fills in the gaps for Ed about the awful story of putting down the uprising in Ishval, Ed comes to the conclusion that he and Al's best chance to get their bodies back involves studying alcehestry – and to do that they have to track down May Chang. Their quest leads them north to Brigg's Wall, Amestris's border-guarding northern fortress, where Major Armstrong's sister, Major General Oliver Mira Armstrong, reigns over a harsh, tough bunch. There they encounter the Homunculus Sloth, discover that Solf Kimblee, the Crimson Alchemist, has been freed from jail and set on Scar's path, and piece together something of the full truth about a grand plan for Amestris which spans centuries. Things get more complicated when Winry is brought to the scene (to reinforce her hostage status) and Scar shows up, but under the circumstances can the Elric brothers even consider him an enemy this time? And who else can they really trust?

Meanwhile, back in Central, Hawkeye has a very scary run-in with Pride as she struggles to maintain safety and sanity in her status as a walking hostage against Mustang, while Mustang calls in an old friend for help. On another front, Hohenheim contemplates finally taking action himself.

Review:

This set, which spans episodes 27-39, begins with a reflective piece focused on Hohenheim which is about 80 % recap of the first 26 episodes and 20 % delving into Hohenheim's own motivations. After that, though, things really begin to sizzle, and quickly. Though the next twelve episodes occasionally pause for a retrospective piece, such as further revealing reflections by Hohenheim and Hawkeye's account of her past and the events in Ishval, they otherwise charge forward with a tightly-packed regimen of action, scheming, and menace. Want to see the sum and substance of what makes this version of the story great? Check out these episodes.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this span of episodes is that it is nearly devoid of side stories. Other than the recap episode, nearly every scene in every episode is somehow related to the bigger overall plot lines. Even the content of its retrospective pieces is directly relevant to current events. For instance, what happened in Ishval shaped the current attitudes of characters like Major Armstrong and Hawkeye; seeing the boisterous Armstrong so downcast and the unwaveringly firm Hawkeye so dead-eyed from what they had to do there is heartbreaking. Hawkeye also gets another one of this season's best sequences in her harrowing encounter with Pride (it may not be who you expected it to be) and how much it shakes her in the aftermath. That, combined with the thinly-veiled threats cast against Winry to keep the Elric brothers in line, the disturbing scheming of General Raven, and the overwhelming power of Father, gives this series a sense of menace well beyond what the first TV series ever achieved and a tightness to the writing not as evident earlier in the series.

The scheming is another big draw here. The earlier episodes dropped plenty of hints that some

kind of grand plan was going on behind the scenes in Amestris, but not until this block of episodes do viewers start to get a sense of what that plan actually is. The scope of it is mind-boggling, but one would expect nothing less from a shonen series running a single main plotline over the course of 64 episodes. Its intricacy and execution so far do an excellent job of getting viewers interested and giving the Elric brothers and their allies an awesome problem to confront and difficult foes to defeat; too often shonen series depend primarily on having personally uber-powerful Big Bad Guys at the core of things to provide the full threat value (and this one does, to an extent, have one in Father – seeing Scar completely flummoxed by an individual foe is a treat), but here the systemic corruption that the Elrics, Mustang, and others must contend with is even more daunting, and that is a challenge that most other shonen series lack.

These episodes offer some great characters and character development, too. While the highlights may be Winry's Round 2 with Scar and the aforementioned scenes with Hawkeye, we also get to see that Hohenheim is not the uncaring, irresponsible bastard that he earlier appeared to be; he is a man who does care but simply does not know how to relate to other people, even his own progeny. We get to see more of the pasts of Hawkeye and Mustang and understand how they hooked up (and get some suggestion that Hawkeye may have her own alchemy-related secrets, unlike in the first series) and see Scar start to question more deeply the nature of his own actions. Ling also heads in an interesting direction, the consequences of which will, no doubt, have an impact for the rest of the series. Pride finally pops up in physical form, and Sloth gets some feature scenes as he figures into a couple of episodes big-time, but the bigger treat is new character Olivier Mira Armstrong, who is cut from the classic hard-ass mold but is also insightful and impressively righteous in her convictions for all of her "this is a harsh place where you must be strong to survive" bluster. Kimblee's expanded role is, by comparison, a disappointment, as he simply does not come across as aggressively evil enough to be exciting and does not cut it as a manipulator.

Of course, Fullmetal Alchemist would not be what it is without its action scenes and humor, though this season does not have as many pitched battles as earlier 13-episode sets. This season's regular episodes open with one of the most intense and hairy battles to date, a multi-sided affair which eventually involves the Homunculi, Father, Scar, May Chang, Ling, chimeras, and the Elric brothers, but then lays off on the heavy-duty action for a while until a Scar/Kimblee battle comes up and Sloth's burrowing results in a heaping amount of trouble for everyone involved. Along the way the series offers no shortage of humorous asides, some of which continue to be annoying in the same way that they were earlier in the series while others sparkle (General Armstrong's comments about the stolen food several years earlier, for instance).

The artistry and technical merits remain on par with what has been seen previously in this series: very sharp most of the time but not without weak points and occasional brief visual flaws. Highlights here include the aforementioned tweaks to character designs in the flashback episodes, Pride's horrifying nature, Olivier's character design, certain automail mechanical designs, and some color contrasts and uses of gray in the mining town in the later episodes. On the downside, the minimal variance in facial structures, especially in female character designs, becomes more noticeable in these episodes. The musical score also maintains the same high standards seen earlier in the series, with highlights here including the ominous vocals used in various places. New opener "Golden Time Lover" is a decent but bland pop song, while new closer "Tied Hands," which primarily features Winry in its visuals, is solid but not quite up to the level of "Let it out." Both get more up-tempo replacements for episode 39.

Recurring roles in the English dub continue to do either mediocre or stand-out jobs, as established by earlier volumes. Caitlin Glass and Todd Haberkorn in particular get some additional nice work as Winry and Ling, respectively, while Scar still is the weak link. Amongst new roles, Stephanie Young is a suitable fit as Olivier and Troy Baker makes a good-sounding new incarnation of Greed. Patrick Seitz so subsumes himself into the role of Sloth that he is unlikely to be recognized.

The thirteen episodes of the Blu-Ray version of this release come on two disks in a now-standard 9-4 distribution. Extras on the disks include clean opener and closer on the second disk and one English audio commentary on each disk, one for episode 28 and the other for episode 36. Both feature line producer Mike McFarland hosting 2-3 of the English voice actors and predominately stick rather closely to the series. Both disks also have the now-standard but no less irritating arrangement of not allowing one to shift between the vocal tracks without going out to the Set-Up menu and providing no option to view the dub with subtitles on. The disk encoding uses an AVC/MPEG-4 codec with 1080p/24 resolution, producing a picture that still has minor glitches for visual nitpickers but generally looks a little better than the earlier two sets. The Japanese track uses lossless Dolby TrueHD 2.0, while the English track uses Dolby TrueHD 5.1. The latter give a little fuller surround sound experience.

Funimation's release of this set, perhaps not coincidentally, nearly coincides with the series' return to TV broadcast of new episodes on Adult Swim, and perhaps also not coincidentally, the next set is due out around the time that the AS broadcast will hit the end of this set. If done intentionally, that seems like a fairly effective marketing gimmick. In general, though, of the sets that have come along so far, this is the one most worth owning.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : A-
Animation : B+
Art : B+
Music : A-

+ Generally strong English dub, great musical score, very involving.
− Apparently hard-subbed, some minor artistic integration issues.

Events in the North come to a head when Ed's group and Kimblee finally clash, but before the final blow can fall Kimblee gets new orders: carve the crest of blood at Briggs. The nationwide transmutation circle is almost complete and the new turn of events soon has "Father"'s staunchest opponents, Ed and Al, separated. With every soldier in Amestris on their tails, the two, along with a few unlikely allies, must make their separate ways to Central and to the heart of the evil that threatens their nation. They're not alone. Olivier Armstrong and Roy Mustang both have plans for Amestris's capital, and neither plan is particularly beneficial to the powers that be, King Bradley and Father included. The coup is on, and Central will burn.

Review:

If you want a demonstration of what a shonen adventure is like when it's done exactly right, you can't go wrong with Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood. Especially now. It has always, at least since its somewhat rushed opening episodes, been a funny, exciting, occasionally wrenching action series of epic scope and deceptive depth. But it's here during the opening strains of its nearly twenty-episode climax that it opens the throttle all the way and really comes into its own.

Of course, this being the show's penultimate set, it isn't all climactic acceleration. There's a good deal of maneuvering to be done and secrets to be revealed before the show can wind up for its final blow-out. It's in this period that we finally learn Hohenheim's past, and Father's. That Ed and Al go their separate ways, create their separate alliances, and demonstrate their separate strengths. That Dr. Marcoh settles his

score with Envy, and Greed breaks with his homunculi brethren. That the boys reconcile with their father and make their final preparations for the Promised Day. There's humor along the way (most memorably during Ed and Winry's ill-timed reunion), and intrigue, and poignancy (most strongly in Al's return to Liore). Brotherhood navigates this all with the same loose-jointed ease with which it has navigated nearly all of its many plot turns and mood shifts, plunking us almost carelessly down right on the brink of the siege of Central.

Whereupon it screams downhill into a pit of tightly-controlled chaos.

It's in that pit that the true mettle of Brotherhood's creators is tested. The siege of Central is an enormous undertaking during which dozens of characters, a half-dozen plot lines, and nearly as many fragmenting and recombining fights are juggled simultaneously with the inexorable advance of the main plot. That takes skill to pull off—a lot of it. And surprisingly, Brotherhood has it. As charming as that loose-jointed feel was, it gave little indication that the series would handle a Byzantine monster like the siege particularly well. But director Yasuhiro Irie and screenwriter Hiroshi Ohnogi orchestrate Hiromu Arakawa's epic climax with a clean ease that is truly eye-opening. Armies of undead dolls, the various homunculi, Central's disordered soldiers and their even more disordered leadership, Mustang and Olivier's factions, Ed's group, Al's group, the Xingese warriors, the Ishvali dissidents, Father, and a few unaffiliated faces from the past—Irie and Ohnogi keep them all moving with miraculous clarity as they bounce off of each other, joining and parting and striving each for their own ends in their own distinctive ways. It's a narrative balancing act of daunting skill, nearly as thrilling and beautifully choreographed as the fights that result from it.

It's also a narrative balancing act that necessitates a few transparent devices. The ways in which it delays and otherwise occupies some of the factions while it focuses on others aren't always artful. Ed and his crew's long, pointless brawl with a legion of flesh-eating mannequins is the worst of them, though the pitifully unconvincing "death" used to keep King Bradley out of the fray is a close second. Such tactics are necessary, one knows, and can pay off most handsomely (especially about four episodes into the next volume), but that doesn't stop them from also being irksome.

There are enough other rote elements scattered throughout this set to remind you that Brotherhood is indeed a shonen adventure, with all of the attendant trappings. Folks who somehow find the time for lengthy speeches on not leaving comrades behind or the relative efficacy of killing as opposed to sparing enemies in the midst of pitched battle, for instance. Or timely rescues by once-absent comrades. But the series gets so much else right that it's positively curmudgeonly to hold that against it. It's full of great little inventions, from Pride, a formless monster comprised of teeth and eyes swimming in jagged lakes of shadow, to the screeching, ravenous masses of eyeless man-dolls that make up Central's "immortal legion" (among anime's more unsettling sights, by the way). It's populated with characters every one of whom, from the tertiary throwaways to the late additions to the big players, is written well enough that they could spearhead a lesser series on their own. Its world strikes a perfect balance of eerie mystery and explicit detail, and it never forgets its slightly goofy sense of humor (or its SD gags), even in its darkest, most disturbing hours—of which it has plenty.

And one shouldn't forget the series' sheer technical skill either. Hiroki Kanno provides simple and efficient, if occasionally slightly sloppy, designs for the characters to inhabit, just as Irie and his collaborators at BONES flesh out Brotherhood's setting with superior backgrounds and complement its colorful, varied plot with vibrant, energetic visuals. Action scenes are pure showboating, full of "because we can" moments of sheer animated excess as characters leap, punch, slice, shoot, burn, detonate and generally wreak mayhem with every ounce of cinematic fluidity and substance that BONES can muster. Akira Senju's score, for its part, is as vast, varied, unsettling, and beautiful as the series itself.

There're no new characters added this set, so your impression of Funimation's dub is unlikely to change for the better or the worse. It's rock-solid work with just the occasional soft spot in it, perfectly

capable of delivering every ounce of the series' considerable impact intact. The script appears to be pretty tight, though it's difficult to tell as the discs' settings prevent one from watching the English version with the subtitles on.

For extras we have two episode-long commentary tracks, one for episode 40 and the other for episode 46. Each features ADR director Mike McFarland with a portion of the cast and is more informative than entertaining—just the way I like 'em. The bump in video quality, for the record, is worth the bump in price.

Filmmaking is a curious art. It's as much a logistical exercise as an artistic one, its practitioners both artists and engineers. There are a good number of differences between the original Fullmetal Alchemist and Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood, but if one had to choose just one, it would be that Fullmetal Alchemist was controlled by the engineers while Brotherhood was controlled by the artists. The original's mechanical precision, its carefully measured ratios of action and tragedy and humor, are no coincidence. Brotherhood is the more organic of the two, ruled simply by what it wants to do rather than what it thinks it should. Which, by the serendipity peculiar to artistic efforts, results in it doing exactly what it should: Weaving an engrossing tale, the next chapter of which, thanks to this set's roiling cauldron of intertwining schemes and destinies, cannot come soon enough.
Grade:
Production Info:
Overall (dub) : A-
Overall (sub) : A-
Story : B+
Animation : A
Art : B+
Music : A-

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szlifierki pneumatyczne (2011-08-01 10:52:32)
I really liked your article. You should write more about that topic.

Top anime alternate list (2011-07-20 06:13)

1. Fullmetal Alchemist Brotherhood
2. Fullmetal Alchemist
3. Death Note
4. Cowboy Bebop
5. Code Geass
6. Code Geass R2
7. Tengen Toppa Gurren-Lagann
8. Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya
9. Eureka Seven
10. Baccano!
11. Last Exile
12. Samarai Champloo
13. RahXephon
14. Mushishi
15. Monster
16. Neon Genesis Evangelion
17. The Vision of Escaflowne

18. Gankutsuou: The Count of Monte Cristo
19. Eden of the East & Movies
20. The Twelve Kingdoms

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